

HEIRESS DELUSION



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HEIRESS OF DELUSION

KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES ALICE IN WONDERLAND BOOK

2



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KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES

You all know the fairytales, the stories that always have the happy ending. But what happens after all those storybook characters get what they wanted? Is it really a happily ever after?

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19 AUGUST



The ticking of the Pinnacle clock marked the passage of the night. I rubbed my hands together, pacing back and forth on the footpath while I waited.

Past midnight now, I stubbornly pushed away any regret at having left Pearl at the *Colorful Joker Tattoo Parlor*. I couldn't leave without confronting Raven. Not after I'd followed him from the back alley behind the tattoo parlor, through the narrow streets of the Clubs Quarter, then into the Diamonds Quarter.

Raven had taken the man with the itchy tattoo into a house with darkened windows, then emerged almost immediately without his companion, and continued at a steady pace until he'd stopped at a bar.

I'd hung behind, and now, I found myself again on the edge of the vampire quarter in the dark—only streets away from where I'd been attacked the previous night.

I cast a glance around. A man walked the street away from me, his hands in his pockets. He took no notice of me as I leaned against a wall. Otherwise, there was no one around.

Tick, tick, tick.

I ground my teeth against the incessant sound of the Pinnacle clock. During the day, the sound faded into the background, but it was always on the threshold of consciousness. At other times, like now, the sound set my teeth on edge. Sometimes, I wanted to cover my ears and scream, if only it would take away the ticking sound.

Instead, I crossed my arms over my chest and waited, wondering if I should take a chance and go into the bar for a drink.

I was weighing the risks of entering a strange, dark bar versus waiting outside in the dark when a passer-by glanced sideways at me. A shiver ran up the length of my spine.

I entered the bar.

“Dirty flamingo,” I ordered, as I settled myself on a stool, with a good view of the bar. Through the mirror across the back wall, I spotted Raven sitting at a booth, staring into his drink. Curiously, I wondered whether the liquid inside his mug was blood.

“What’s a young lady like yourself doing here?” The barman asked, sizing me up as he slid my drink toward me. His words jerked my attention away from Raven.

“Minding my own business,” I replied, sliding a few dinah across the counter and taking a sip. I relished the burn of the liquid, aware of the weight of the barman’s stare as he leaned against the bar and polished glasses with a rag.

I glanced toward Raven’s booth, and my eyes widened.

He’d gone.

I spun around on my stool, leaping to my feet, and running to the door. Behind me, the barman chuckled.

“Spades,” I muttered, looking in both directions along the street.

Raven had disappeared.

Again.

Then a hand clamped down on my shoulder.



I screamed. The sound of it echoed around the street.

Then another hand clamped over my mouth.

“Please don’t do that, Inspector,” a soft, deep voice purred in my ear, raising goosebumps along my skin.

He inhaled, as though breathing in my scent, then he whispered: “Will you promise not to scream if I release you?”

My breath was coming in shallow gasps again, and black shadows fluttered in my vision.

A memory of the vampire that attacked me flashed through my mind.

I should have gone home. I should never have come here.

I closed my eyes.

“Do you promise?” the soft voice asked again.

I nodded. *What else could I do?*

He removed his hands from where they were clamped over my face and shoulder. I spun around, taking a few steps backward, and saw my attacker.

Raven.

Alone in the darkened avenue, every inch of my body was aware of him as he stood before me with a smirk on his face. I fixed my eyes on him, determined not to lose him again, then wondered why I wasn't running for my life. The truth was, I couldn't move—I couldn't even tear my eyes away from his face.

Raven straightened his coat, tapped his fashionable cane on the ground, then tipped his hat and bowed. “I don't believe anyone has introduced us,” he said. His expression was neither friendly nor ominous. The faint hint of a frown marred his otherwise flawless face, and he was staring at me with curiosity. As he straightened again and looked expectantly at me, I noticed the tailored line of his three-piece suit, and his crisp, white shirt. Even Chesh, fashionable as he was, would be envious of Raven's dapper turnout.

“I know who you are,” I replied. “You're Raven.”

Raven's mouth curled up into a half-smile, and a light danced in the dark pools of his brown eyes. He inclined his head in acknowledgment. “You are Inspector Rowntree. We are not complete strangers.”

I wiped the moisture from my hands on my skirts, then twined my fingers in the fabric, trying to stop them from shaking.

“How do you know me?” I asked. My voice trembled, and I lifted my chin defiantly, although I'd also rolled onto the balls of my feet as though making ready to run. He was more alluring, and more frightening, than anyone I'd ever met.

On the surface, he was gorgeous, and the sparkle in his eyes mesmerized me. Then a glimpse of the sharp edge of his fangs brought me back to reality—he was a vampire, and I might be his prey.

“I could ask you the same question. Or perhaps this one—why were you following me?”

I shook my head. “I wasn't... wait, you didn't answer my question.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I asked you first.”

Raven crooked his eyebrow as amusement danced in his eyes. “I asked you second. Manners dictate that a lady should speak first. I would not wish to interrupt you, Inspector.”

“Please don’t call me that. I’m off duty.”

“Pardon my manners. I’ve not introduced myself. My name is Mr. Raven Maddox Cappello.” He bowed again.

I straightened my shoulders and dipped my head as I bobbed a curtsy. “Miss. Ivy Rowntree.” I frowned. “Wait—Cappello? Are you related to the man who owns *Cappello’s Finest Hats*?”

Raven made an exclamation of surprise. He removed his hat and turned it over in his hands. “I *am* the man who owns *Cappello’s Finest Hats*. The best hat shop in this city. My father was a milliner. He taught me the trade from birth,” Raven cocked his head again, considering me. “Tell me, how do you know of my shop? It’s in a place well-bred young women rarely frequent.”

“I passed it the other day—during the daytime. I saw a hat in the window I thought would suit my sister very well, but your shop was closed. I swallowed, remembering the vampire attack. “I haven’t been back for it.”

Raven nodded without taking his eyes off me. “It would please me to show you my hats someday. I believe there is a perfect hat for everyone. It’s just a matter of finding it. Or, in my case, making it.” He flashed a smile at me, and my breath caught.

I smiled back, dropping my guard. He seemed more imposing than frightening—with the self-assurance of someone who wants for nothing and is certain of their value in the world. Tentatively, I reached out towards where he held his hat in his hands. “May I?”

Raven passed me the hat. A black top hat, well balanced, with a narrow brim that curled up at the edges, and splayed out at the top of the crown. The material was soft beneath my fingers, made from the finest silk. A dark blue ribbon finished it. I peered at it, considering its overall esthetic, and the workmanship to make it. “A very fine hat. Fit for a milliner.”

He smiled again. I glimpsed the sharp fangs, and my smile slid away—I’d forgotten to fear him. I passed back the hat and fought the urge to run.

“Tell me, Mr. Cappello, why did you buy me a drink at *The Tea Party*?” I whispered. “Why didn’t you stay?”

Raven turned and strolled down the street again, pausing to allow me to follow. Without thinking, I fell in beside him. He held his cane in one hand

and put the other behind his back and cocked his head to the side as though listening to something. “That sound is irritating, isn’t it?”

In the night's silence, the Pinnacle clock chimed the hour.

“Yes,” I replied. “When I can’t get the ticking out of my head, I understand why people would prefer it stayed broken.”

“I don’t think it’s the sound, so much as the—”

“Memories,” I finished. “Yes, I know.”

“It *is* loud,” Raven continued. “Especially for my kind. It sounds like that damned clock is shouting at me.”

I made a face. “How can you sleep?”

Raven chuckled. “I don’t sleep. Not much anyway. My kind needs sleep only about once every month.”

I raised my eyebrows at that information but didn’t turn toward him. Somehow he was less threatening, less maddeningly alluring, if I didn’t have direct eye contact with him. Still, I was aware of him next to me. As I walked, my eyes wandered across the dark, empty avenue.

A thought occurred to me. “If your hearing is so superior, why didn’t you hear me following you?”

Raven smiled, darting me a sideways glance. “I knew someone was following me. It was your scent that gave you away.”

“You could smell me?” I exclaimed, then pursed my lips. “I washed only yesterday.”

“You don’t smell,” Raven said, smirking. “You have a unique *scent*. I could pick you out of a dark room full of people, with a blindfold—just by your scent. Another strength of my kind.”

I turned that piece of information over in my mind. “You knew I was in the bar, didn’t you?”

Raven nodded.

“And the tattoo parlor?”

Raven nodded again.

“Why didn’t you confront me there?” I asked.

Raven shrugged one shoulder. “A test of your courage, your determination.”

I raised one eyebrow. “And?”

Raven frowned.

“Did I pass the test?”

He made an amused sound in his throat. "I find neither wanting," he replied, his eyes sparkling again. I looked away before I lost myself in them again.

"You still haven't told me why you bought me that drink?" I pointed out. "Or why you left me that note."

I pulled the card out of my bag, its corners rounded and scuffed by use, and held it out to him. "You put a puzzle in front of me: *We choose our future*—what did you mean by it?"

Raven didn't read the card. He didn't take his eyes off my face. "Call it a spur-of-the-moment decision."

I blinked. "I don't understand. What does it mean?"

"It's a saying—one that I often repeat to myself: *We cannot change our past, but we choose our future.*"

Raven started walking again, and I fell in beside him. We strolled in silence. The only sound was our footsteps echoing in the darkness and the semi-regular *tap* of Raven's cane on the cobblestones. We turned a corner, then another, and I looked down at the card in my hand, still puzzling over Raven's response. I was about to press the point when Raven spoke again.

"You mentioned others fear the Pinnacle." Raven blurted. "Are you afraid of it?"

I gave a little laugh. "No. It's just gears and moving parts. Complex, but just a machine."

"You're too young to remember the Queen of Hearts, or to fear her," Raven observed.

"The *late* Queen," I corrected him. "Yes, she died the year I was born. I'm not afraid of her, but I know other people fear that she will return."

"Nobody ever found her body."

"Mother said... I mean, President Rowntree said the late Queen was dead. She must have had proof."

Raven tapped his cane on the cobblestones, his brow drawn together as he considered my words. "Unless she wanted to reassure the people she was trying to lead. Unless she was soothing their terror of the Queen."

"The late Queen," I corrected again.

Raven looked at me. "There are always two sides to every story," he murmured.

I saw Raven's eyes dart to the shape of my mouth, before returning to my eyes again.

“You have the most unusual eyes—did you know? Golden circles around your iris. In all my long years, I have never seen another person with eyes like that.” He leaned forward as he spoke; his voice was like velvet, a sound that reeled me in like a fish caught in his net. Then he straightened, clearing his throat. “Come,” he said, his tone sharper. “My place is here. I wish to show you something inside. Something important.”

He offered me his arm, as he turned toward a three-story house towering over the street, the carvings around the doorway were menacing in the darkness. A light flickered inside, and someone screamed.

As the scream split the air, his enchantment broke, releasing me from his power. I jerked backward, stumbling on the cobblestones. Raven leaned forward, reaching out to me.

His lips stretched over the sharp curve of his fangs, and I remembered the man from my dreams—an enchanting killer. A bloodthirsty vampire.

“Get away from me,” I screamed, clutching at the base of my neck.

Then, finding my feet, I turned and ran as fast as I could in the other direction.

20 AUGUST



The sun was setting when I stood once more in front of *Cappello's Finest Hats*. On one side of it, stood a shop named *Masquerading our Love* that purported to sell both masquerade costumes and love potions. On the other was a taxidermist with a window display comprised of several stuffed flamingos and a hedgehog positioned like a croquet set. Distracted, I stared from one to the other, shook my head, and then focused on the task at hand.

Hovering on the doorstep, I debated between running back home or pushing open the door. My heart thumped a rapid beat.

The man was a vampire. A vampire in a city whose blood stocks were running low.

When I had woken that morning, I'd scoured *The Forge Hart* for articles about vampire attacks. I had found nothing, but that didn't mean there was nothing to find.

When I'd returned home in the early hours of the morning, I'd found Mother and Pearl had waited up for me. They'd been angry and worried. I'd made excuses and hurried to bed before they'd chastised me.

I'd slept until well past breakfast, but when I'd entered the drawing room for morning tea, I'd found Alice waiting for me. On a vase in the center of the table were five red roses.

"Mother? Shouldn't you be in your office?" I'd asked her. It was then that I'd noticed the dark circles under her eyes and her white knuckles where she had clasped her hands in her lap. She looked down her nose at me, pursing her lips.

“I understand you are a woman, Ivy,” Alice had said. “You are a smart woman, capable of making your own decisions. However, your behavior over the last couple of days has been rash and poorly thought through.”

“I’m sorry—” I’d started, but she’d held up a hand to stop me.

“I’m not finished,” she had said. “It would be remiss of me not to caution you as to the consequences of this behavior. Really, Ivy, venturing into the...”—Alice paused, searching for the right word.—“more dangerous parts of the city? Alone? At night? It is not like you to take such risks. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m sorry.”

Alice had raised an eyebrow. “I think I deserve an explanation for why I stayed up half of the night waiting for you to come home.”

“I didn’t expect you to wait up.”

“Is that all you have to say for yourself?” Alice had demanded. “Where were you?”

I’d swallowed as my stomach twisted with remorse. “I took a walk. I met Chesh, and we visited a bar,” I had lied. “It’s what we often do of an evening.”

“You shouldn’t even have left your bed yesterday. Let alone frequenting bars. You weren’t well.”

“I told you I was fine.”

“You were unconscious when you came home the night before,” Alice had said, raising her voice. “I don’t call that fine.”

I’d smothered a sigh. “I’m sorry for worrying you. As you said, I’m grown. I may go where I please.”

Alice had given me a hard stare. “You may be a woman, but you are still my daughter.” She stood so abruptly that she startled me, and my teacup had wobbled on its saucer, spilling its hot liquid. “Please keep in mind what I have said.”

Now, I thought about our conversation again—and the row I’d had with Pearl when she’d confronted me about lying to her—as I stood in front of Raven’s hat shop. I looked at the hat I’d thought would suit Pearl and decided to buy it. Pearl was more likely to forgive my behavior if I brought her a gift. Besides, it would look beautiful on her.

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I pushed open the door to step into *Cappello’s Finest Hats*. The bell tinkled as I entered.

My mouth fell open as I gaped at my surroundings. The inside of the shop was a cavernous room, empty but for a mirror on one end with an armchair next to it. The ceilings were high, which gave the room a sense of space, but along the walls were rows and rows of shelves that stretched all the way to the high ceiling.

Hats lined every surface—in all colors, all shapes, and all sizes. For women, for men, for children, for workers, for daytime, for evening, for tea, for the races, and for balls. There were toppers, beefeaters, yeoman, derby's boater hats, helmets, caps, bowler hats, navy hats, marines, half-moons, cross hats, bonnets, berets, cloche hats, fedoras, cocktail hats, fascinators, tiaras, and so many others. Hundreds of hats, at least.

"May I help you?" A young woman came over, smiling.

I looked for Raven, unable to loosen the knot of apprehension in my stomach.

"I'd like a hat," I started, when I didn't see Raven. I stared up at the shelves that climbed the walls. Around the edge, was a ladder on rollers to allow the shop assistants to reach the hats on the highest shelves.

"You're in the right place," the shop assistant said with a smile. "We have the finest hats in The Forge." I noted she didn't have any fangs. She didn't appear to be afraid, although, as she turned her head to consider the shelves, I saw there was an unsightly scar running down the left side of her face. Surprised to see someone so unbeautiful working in a customer-contact role, I stared for a moment, then looked away.

I wondered when the inspector assigned to this part of the city had been here last. I couldn't imagine the young woman's appearance would have passed that inspection.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" the woman asked.

I cleared my throat, but before I could answer, another voice spoke at the rear of the shop.

"Thank you, Miss. Lapin, I'll attend to Miss. Rowntree."



Raven delicately placed a hat on my head, then stepped back to appraise it. He was focused—not on me, but on the hat. He tapped a finger on his chin, concentrating, as though the hat presented him with a puzzle.

Without a word, he whipped the hat off my head and replaced it with another. Again, he stepped backward and looked me over.

With a small shake of his head, he swapped it with yet another hat.

"They're all beautiful," I murmured, eyeing the hats piling up on the armchair.

"Miss. Lapin," Raven called out. "Take these away, please. They're not suitable."

"Yes, sir." Miss. Lapin appeared out of nowhere and gathered up the discarded hats. She slid the ladder along the walls, climbing up and down to put away the hats that Raven no longer needed.

"I like that one," I said, as Raven put another hat on my head.

Raven considered me, then shook his head again. "You present an enigma, Miss. Rowntree," he said, his mouth set in a straight line.

"How so?" I asked, a flutter of nervousness going through my stomach.

"Do you remember me telling you, last time we met, that I believe there is the perfect hat out there for everyone? It is my mission to make sure that every customer who leaves my shop does so in possession of their perfect hat."

"These are all lovely hats," I said.

"Lovely, yes," Raven replied, turning to face the shelves and looking up at the highest shelves. "Perfect, no. That is the problem."

I swallowed and looked at my feet. I wasn't as beautiful as my sister; I knew that. Now, the knowledge that Raven didn't believe I suited any of his beautiful hats hurt me.

I shook my head. The man was a vampire. An alluring but dangerous man. More than that, young women like myself didn't have friendships with vampires—let alone any more intimate relationship.

Still, I couldn't deny the flare of joy in my stomach when he came near, nor my easy smiles when we talked. I knew I should fear him—I *did* fear him—but not enough to keep my distance.

Raven put a finger under my chin, lifting my face to stare at him again. This time, he wasn't holding a hat. "Don't worry, Miss. Rowntree, I have many more hats in my workshop."

I gave him a small smile. "I didn't intend to be such a problem. I only came for a hat for my sister."

"It's no problem at all," Raven tilted his head to the side, considering me. When he next spoke, he lowered his voice so that only I could hear

him. “I don’t mean you’re not deserving of those hats if that is what you’re thinking. Rather, those hats are not worthy of you. You are a beautiful woman. Very striking.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. I couldn’t tear my gaze from his face. His warm eyes sparkled, and he held my gaze. Then he dropped his hand from my chin and turned towards the back of the store.

“Miss. Lapin?” he called out.

The shop assistant appeared from the back.

“Watch the shop. I’ll be upstairs.”

Miss. Lapin nodded. I felt a stab of disappointment that he would be leaving. I’d enjoyed his attention.

He’s a shop owner, trying to do business, that’s all, I told myself. I gathered my bag and the hat I’d selected for Pearl.

Raven turned to me and gestured towards a staircase in the back corner. “Please accompany me upstairs.”

I blinked, glancing over at where Miss. Lapin was dusting the shelves.

“Upstairs?” I asked, my voice quavering.

The side of Raven’s mouth curled up in a half-smile. “My workshop is above the shop. I might have a hat in my workshop that would suit you better.”

“Of course,” I said, blushing again.

Raven smiled, though I noticed he took care to avoid showing his teeth, and he put his hand on my elbow as we started up the steps.



“Will you take tea with me, Miss. Rowntree?” Raven asked as he held open the door. I stepped into his workshop and looked around.

If there had been a lot of hats downstairs, there were at least as many in Raven’s workshop. The hats were in varying stages of completion—some looked almost finished, others were only half-made and missing decoration, or brims, or crowns.

In addition, there was a huge desk pushed against one wall, overflowing with papers, some pinned to a board, and others that had drifted down to pool on the floor.

An identical armchair stood in one corner, though this one held several folds of cloth over it. Everywhere I looked, there were bolts of material, ribbons, buttons, lace, felt, and pins.

On one side, the curtains were open to the night sky. In the corner stood a small bed. Several suit jackets hung on a rail next to it.

“Do you live here?” I asked, remembering the other building Raven had called “his place” and the scream that had frightened me away.

Raven looked over at the bed in the corner. “Yes. It suits me to stay here above the shop. I keep a separate residence.” Raven looked down at his hands, an uncomfortable expression coming over his face. I wondered if he was remembering the screaming too. “But I spend little time there at present. Now, I use that for... well, I have put it to better use. How do you take your tea?”

“White, no sugar,” I replied. I was about to ask about the screaming when Raven turned his back and moved over to the corner by his bed. I saw that he had a teapot set above a stove there too. As he made the tea, I wandered around the workshop, looking at the various half-made hats. As I moved closer, I recognized designs drawn on the papers scattered everywhere. Hat designs. I leaned over the desk for a closer inspection. Dozens of detailed drawings of hats were scattered over the table and pinned to the wall. Beautiful designs—some of them, outlandish and with a tendency to defy gravity—and all of them unique. I’d never seen hats like Raven could make.

Raven cleared his throat. When I turned, I saw that he’d cleared away the fabric draped over the armchair and set a tray of tea on a small side table.

“Please,” he motioned for me to sit, before drawing a chair up to sit down across from me.

I sipped at my tea, breathing in the scent.

“Thank you,” I said. “I didn’t mean to trouble you about the hats. I only intended to buy something for my sister.”

“It’s no trouble, at all,” Raven replied. “Finding the right hat for my customers is my job. It’s the reason I established a hat shop.” Raven smiled, catching my eye. “Finding the right hat for *you* is my pleasure.”

I blushed again, dropping my eyes from his gaze. I took another sip of my tea.

“How is your work coming along?” Raven asked.

“It keeps me busy,” I replied. “With all this business about the clock, we’ve had people not show up for work. I’ve been taking extra shifts to cover for those who won’t leave their homes.”

Raven watched me. “Why did you become an inspector?” he asked. “It’s an unusual occupation for a woman like you.”

“Mother suggested it. She said that if I decided to earn my own money, I should serve the city and work for her.”

“Is your sister an inspector, too?”

“No,” I said, then chuckled at the thought. “My sister can live on her esthetic stipend. She doesn’t need to work.”

Raven frowned. “You don’t? I imagine your stipend would be more than enough for you to live on. Yet, you work as well?”

“I don’t collect the stipend,” I replied, swallowing as my throat threatened to close over. “I work instead.”

“Why do you refuse the stipend?” Raven asked.

I set down the now empty teacup on the side table and clasped my hands in my lap. “I was uncomfortable about being evaluated for the stipend. It’s not always easy to have such a beautiful twin. We’re not identical, and we’re always compared. So, I turned my passion into some income—I make pocket watches,” I shrugged. “But I don’t earn enough selling watches, so I took a job.”

“You are an artisan yourself?” Raven raised his eyebrows in surprise. He pointed to the watch tucked into the pocket of my vest. “Is that your work?”

I pulled the watch out of my pocket and flicked open the lid, then held it out to Raven, who leaned over to examine it.

“Very fine workmanship,” he replied. He sat back in his chair, examining me. I squirmed in my seat under the weight of his gaze. “You’re a surprising woman. Not at all what I expected.”

I tipped my head to the side, frowning. “How so?”

“You are a fine artisan—you shall become a master watchmaker should you follow your talent—and you care for your sister very much. You are intelligent, courageous, and determined—traits rare in your social class.” Raven paused, frowning. “You don’t enjoy being assessed for your looks for the esthetic stipend, yet you work as an esthetic inspector. In doing so, you hold others to an esthetic standard that you dislike being held to yourself. You seem to be a kind woman, yet you put people out of business,

making them destitute. No,” Raven said. “I’m not sure what to make of you, Miss. Rowntree.”

I stared, wide-eyed, as I absorbed his words. I felt the sharp cut of his criticism, and his observations lay heavy and uncomfortable with me.

“The esthetic laws say that a public place must be esthetically pleasing. Everybody knows the law. I don’t put people out of business without fair warning,” I protested, feeling the need to defend myself. “Nor do I enjoy it—I don’t make the laws, but I have to uphold them.”

“Perhaps everyone knows the law, but not everyone can be beautiful,” Raven replied. “Nor can they all remain young and shapely, nor unmarked by accident or disease. The esthetic laws punish those who do not conform to a long-held ideal of beauty.”

“Even the unbeautiful can make themselves more pleasing to others. As you know, the right hat, or a well-fitted suit, an appealing hairstyle, or well-applied makeup can improve one’s appearance.”

“All of which cost dinah,” Raven replied. He stood and walked over to the window, looking into the night. “Yet those maimed, scarred, crippled, or elderly, have no way of earning an income. They do not qualify for the esthetic stipend. They cannot find work. These people can’t afford food or a roof over their heads, let alone tailored suits or regular hair styling.”

I noticed his well-cut coat and trousers, his polished shoes. Raven might not approve of the stipend, but he wasn’t averse to making himself presentable.

“Is that why you employ Miss. Lapin in your shop?” I asked.

“Miss. Lapin works here because she is good with customers. She had an accident as a child that marked her face. She can’t hide it, so she must live with it. I don’t see why she must remain out of sight because of an old scar.”

“There can’t be many like her, though,” I said. Raven turned to me, his eyes wide with surprise. “My work takes me all over the city, to shops and workplaces,” I explained. “I’ve seen very few people whose physical appearance matches your description.”

Raven looked like he was about to say something. Then he stopped and turned away. He cast an eye around his workshop. “I don’t have the right hat for you here,” he said. “I will need to apply myself to the problem of your hat.” He waved a hand towards the desk, which was overflowing with designs. Raven straightened his coat, avoiding my gaze. He tapped a finger

on his leg. Then, as though he'd decided, he gave me a serious look. "Last time we met, you asked me about the note on the card. Do you still want to know why I left it for you?"

I frowned, surprised at the sudden change in the conversation. I gave him a jerky nod, though his fierce demeanor made me reluctant.

"In that case, there's something I'd like to show you. Before we leave, though, you must promise me you will not breathe a word of this to anyone. Not even your mother, nor your sister. Can you promise me, Miss Rowntree?"

I slipped my hand into my clutch and felt the tip of the card with Raven's handwritten message. Raven offered a solution to the puzzle—how could I refuse?



The alley smelled like piss and vomit. I wrinkled my nose, wondering when the street cleaner was due. Ahead of me, Raven stepped into a spotlight cast by a mushroom-shaped street-lamp. The warm glow of firelight illuminated a circle of gold, like a crown, on his black hair. He turned, looking over his shoulder to meet my eyes. There was a smirk on his face as though he was amused by the fact that he'd caught me admiring him. My face flushed hot, and I looked down at my feet.

When I looked up, Raven had stepped out of the light and was crouching in the shadows. He turned his head to peer up and down the alleyway, then he pulled up a metal disk to reveal a hole in the street.

I moved closer to see what he was doing.

"I'd like you to see something," Raven said as he looked up at me.

I hesitated, then leaned forward to peer into the hole. I couldn't see anything—it was dark, as though it fell into a bottomless pit.

"Is this what you wanted to show me?"

"No." Raven's mouth curled up into a smirk. "This is the way."

I looked at the hole in the ground. "To where?"

Raven wagged a finger at me. "I have to show you."

"You can't expect me to go down there!" I said. "It's just a... hole."

"This is one of many entrances to a network of underground tunnels that run beneath the city."

“Underground tunnels?” I exclaimed. I peered down and saw a ladder disappearing into the dark. “Why did I not know about these before?”

“Vampires have not always been... welcome in Melfall. Our presence here has become tolerated, but it was not always so. We kept our tunnels a secret, in case the prevailing attitude towards my people turns to prejudice once more. The tunnels always provided a way for vampires to move around the city unnoticed, or during the day.”

I glanced upwards to see a sliver of the night sky between the roofs of the buildings that towered over the street. There was not even a hint of light on the horizon.

“It’s far from dawn,” I replied.

Raven quirked one eyebrow. “There’s something down there you should see.” He held out a gloved hand. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

My heart raced at the thought of going down into a dark tunnel with a vampire. I remembered

the vampire who had attacked me nearby, but I didn’t get the same feeling when I

was near Raven. My stomach flipped and my heart thundered, but the terror was absent. Rather, I

wanted to be close to him and to know what he had to say. Our conversation at his workshop

had rolled around in my mind as we’d walked together, weaving through the backstreets.

I told myself that Raven could have attacked me during our walk together, yet he hadn’t. That thought didn’t reassure me, but it gave me some

comfort.

However, the thought of climbing down a ladder into an unknown darkness, where any manner of vampires could be lurking, gave me pause.

“Will there be other vampires?” I asked.

“You’ll be safe with me,” he replied. “Though it’s not gentlemanly, I’ll go first—if it would give you some comfort?”

I watched Raven step down onto the first rung of the ladder, then the next, and the next until he disappeared into the hole.

I crouched down and peered into the darkness. I saw the faint outline of his white shirt.

“Miss Rowntree?” Raven’s voice rang out as an echo. “You may follow.”

I hesitated a moment longer before my curiosity got the better of me. I knew so much about Melfall, yet there was a whole network of tunnels underneath this city I’d never known about until now. I wondered if Alice knew about them. Chesh did not, or he would have told me about them—if not taken me for a tour.

I inched closer to the hole, then bunched my skirts together and set my foot on the first rung. Carefully, I stepped down to the next rung. As I continued down until my face was level with the street.

“Miss. Rowntree?” Raven called up to me. “Pull the cover of the manhole over the top of you, so no one can follow us.”

“Who would follow?” I called back, looking up at the dim light of the night above. The only light that filtered down into the darkness.

“The cover must be closed. It’s the code of the tunnels,” Raven replied.

I was breathing quickly as I reached up and pulled the cover over my head, plunging myself into darkness. The manhole cover fell into place with a thud that echoed all around. I clung to the ladder as I blinked, over and over, trying to force my eyes to adjust to the dark. My breaths became shallow, and my hands were slick as they gripped onto the metal rung.

“Miss. Rowntree?” Footsteps rang out on the rungs below, coming closer. Suddenly Raven’s body was next to mine, where I was clinging to the ladder. His body pressed against my back; he put his arms around mine and covered my hands with both of his. Raven’s chin hovered just above my shoulder, and he whispered in my ear.

“I apologize in advance for this inappropriate invasion of your space, but if you will allow me, I will guide you down. You need not be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” I said, but my voice wavered as I spoke.

Raven chuckled silently, and I felt the suppressed laughter shudder through his body as it pressed against mine. A bubble of laughter rose to my throat too, and a giggle escaped my lips, the sound amplified by the echo chamber around us.

Suddenly, we were both laughing aloud, pressed together, clinging to the ladder as our only anchor in the darkness. At the moment, I felt as though there was no one else in the world except for myself and Raven. That thought did not frighten me.

Raven leaned closer to my ear again, and his words tickled my ear. “My eyesight is better than yours. I will guide you down. You’ll feel better when your feet touch solid ground.”

Raven guided my hands down each rung of the ladder. His body pressed against mine as we descended deeper into the ground. Unable to see anything except Raven’s pale hands where they gripped my own, I gave myself over to his guidance.

“Take a deep breath,” Raven whispered. “Then, exhale through your nose.”

I did as he said, then the impact of his words hit me, and I stopped climbing as I whispered back. “I didn’t know vampires can read minds. Do you know everything I’m thinking?”

A shudder of suppressed laughter vibrated from Raven again. “I can’t read your mind,” he said. “I can smell your fear.”

When my foot hit something solid, a wave of relief washed over me. When both of my feet were on the floor of the tunnel, Raven gave my hands a quick squeeze before stepping away to put space between us. I was aware of his physical absence, and part of me wished he would embrace me again.

Raven kept hold of one hand and tugged me forward. I took each cautious step, unable to see the path ahead of me.

“Not much further,” Raven said. “Can you hear them already?”

I strained my ears. Nothing. Then I tilted my head to the side.

“Yes,” I said. “What is that?”

Muffled sounds grew louder as we moved further through the darkness. Then Raven came to a stop. A door swung open with a shriek of metal grinding on metal.

I blinked, blinded by the bright light within.

A fire blazed from a hearth at the far side of what looked like the living room of an ordinary house. I squinted into the dim light.

Gathered in small groups were far more people than the space should accommodate. Some were sleeping; others huddled together under tattered blankets. Still others shared drinks or food, many sharing plates, cups, and utensils. A few small children ran around the corner of the room, playing a game known only to themselves.

They were dirty, malnourished, and dressed in rags. They noticed us, and it was only a moment before everyone in the room was staring at us. Their eyes bulged from faces with skin pulled tight over their bones.

I gasped.

A man, his shoulders wrapped in a worn blanket, stepped forward. "Mr. Cappello?" he asked. He smiled, his mouth was half-full of rotten, blackened teeth, the others missing. He limped with a lopsided gait, and I noticed one of his legs was bent at an odd angle.

I swallowed, forcing myself to stand my ground as he came toward us. Raven tightened his grasp on my hand.

"Mr. Burke," Raven gave him a bow. "Please allow me to introduce an acquaintance of mine, Miss. Rowntree."

Mr. Burke nodded his head at me, curiosity deepening the lines that creased his forehead. "A pleasure, Miss. Rowntree."

"Mr. Burke," I replied, but my voice cracked and wavered. I searched around for something else to say, but Raven saved me.

"How do you all fare, Mr. Burke?" Raven asked.

Mr. Burke bobbed his head, pulling his blanket tighter around his shoulders. "Well enough." He jerked his head towards the corner. "Got another family in yesterday. Inspector shut the shop. They ran out of money, couldn't pay the rent. Ended up on the streets."

I looked over in the direction where Mr. Burke was pointing to see Mr. Thackery, from *Thackery's Fine Antiques*, which I'd closed for code violations last week. I remembered how he'd knelt on the floor of his shop and pleaded with me to spare his livelihood, so he could feed his family.

A sudden weight pressed down on me. I shrank back as though trying to hide from sight, but Mr. Thackery saw me, and recognition flickered over his face. He wrinkled his nose, as though he'd smelled something

unpleasant, then turned his back, putting an arm around a thin woman, nursing a young child.

“Do you have spare food and blankets?” Raven asked.

Mr. Burke nodded again. “We’ll manage,” he said. “There’s always something to share.”

I looked around at the malnourished people, and I understood the lie in his words. These people had nothing, yet they shared what little they had to make sure that the others wouldn’t starve.

I noticed a young girl marked down one side of her face with scars, evidence that she’d once suffered the pox—a disease that sometimes ran through the more crowded sections of the city. Sitting next to her, a young boy had a stump in place of a hand. I wondered whether it was punishment for theft.

Everywhere I looked, I saw scars, missing limbs, signs of sickness, or of old age. They were all ragged, dirty, and their shoulders and backs slumped, as though they bore great weights on their shoulders. I couldn’t help but stare. I had never seen so many unbeautiful people. How were they all living beneath Melfall?

Raven touched my elbow. I blinked, noticing that Mr. Burke had wandered away. “Are you ready to leave?”

I nodded; my throat so tight that I could not form words to answer him.



Raven pushed open the manhole, and, once he’d climbed out to street level, he bent down to take my hand and pull me out. I took a deep breath of the clear air, pleased to be free of the dark tunnels, and the strange feeling of being enclosed in a small space, as though there wasn’t enough air to breathe.

I brushed the dirt from my skirts and petticoats, shaking them out as I avoided Raven’s eye.

“Miss. Rowntree?” There was an uncertain quality to Raven’s tone. “Are you all right?”

Clasping my hands in front of me, I said, “The new family down there,”—I struggled to keep my voice steady—“I recognized them. Last week, I closed their shop.”

I pressed my lips together as my throat closed, and tears prickled at my eyes. "It is my fault," I whispered, then covered my mouth to stop the sobs from escaping.

Raven stepped forward, taking my hands in his. I couldn't meet his eye until he put a finger underneath my chin and turned my face up to his. "I didn't know that. I didn't take you down there to upset you. Only to show you that these people exist, hidden away beneath a city that accepts only the beautiful and perfect. You may not see them on your streets, but they exist."

I nodded, unable to speak as the weight of regret filled me from the inside. I took a gasping breath.

"I'll walk you home," Raven said as he tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow.

I pulled away and turned to face him. "Why did you take me down there if not to show me what I'd done?"

"We cannot change the past," Raven said. "But, we choose our future."

Tears prickled my eyes. "Can we? Can they?"

"They choose to make the best of what they have," Raven replied, then he took a deep breath. "I choose to help them. You can choose to help them, too."

I stood still. "How?"

"You asked me why I left you that card. Those people are the reason."

"I don't understand."

Raven hesitated, studying my face. "I need someone close to the President."

"You said I wasn't to tell anyone. Not even Mother."

Raven tapped a finger on his leg. "I need to know about the President's movements."

My throat went dry. "You want me to betray my mother?"

"I want you to help those people who are powerless because of your mother's laws," Raven replied, his voice quiet.

I opened my mouth to argue with him, but no words came out. After a long silence, Raven reached out to take my hand, tucking it into the crook of his elbow, then guided me through the streets.

We walked most of the way in silence. He placed his hand over mine as I rested my hand on his elbow. The light touch of his fingers gave me some measure of comfort, but they also reminded me of my failures. Part of me wanted to cling to him, another part wanted to turn my face away in shame,

and yet another wanted to rage at him for putting me in this terrible position.

As the ring of our footsteps echoed on the cobblestones in the night, I thought of the gaunt faces of the unbeautiful people, living underground with no place in their own city, cast out because of things they could not change. I wondered how many people I had rendered homeless because of my callous application of the law.

My eyes trailed the ground as I walked, unaware of my surroundings, absorbed by my own thoughts, so I didn't even notice where we were. I'd forgotten my fear of Raven the vampire and put my faith in Raven, the man. But was he a friend? Or was he using me to get to Alice?

When Raven coughed, I blinked and looked around, surprised to be standing in front of the Pinnacle. Raven was staring up at it, his mouth set into a line.

"You have some skill at clockwork," Raven said. "What do you make of the clock?"

I blinked at him, surprised by his question. I'd been so distracted I hadn't considered that Raven's might have taken a different path.

"It... is a beautiful example of craftsmanship, from what I can see," I replied. "Though I haven't been able to get a closer look. It's also a puzzle—the way it stopped working, then started again. I don't know how that has happened. Though I think the Tweedles might have something to do with it."

Raven frowned. "Why?"

"They usually have a part in any mischief regarding the late Queen."

Raven tightened his grip on my hand. "I have little acquaintance with the Tweedle brothers, I'll admit, but I don't see how they could have any connection with the strange happenings around this clock."

"Why do you say that?"

Raven looked up at the clock again. "Do you know much about the history of the Pinnacle?"

I nodded. "I've been researching it, and I have found that the late Queen liked to use the Pinnacle clock as a platform for her addresses to her people."

A smile flitted across Raven's face before he became serious again. "Yes, she did," he said. "She commissioned that clock. It was a symbol of her power."

I frowned. “She can’t have. That clock is old—it must have been around for a hundred years.”

Raven nodded.

I blinked. “You mean, the late Queen’s mother built it?”

Raven shook his head. “The Queen of Hearts commissioned the building of this clock, to celebrate the start of her reign over The Forge.”

“That isn’t possible,” I murmured, noticing a tightness in my chest as I looked at him.

“She was also called the Red Queen.”

“Red is the color of hearts,” I said.

“Red is the color of blood.” Raven raised his eyebrows just a little.

Vampires drink blood, I thought.

Raven said nothing, though I wondered again whether he could read minds since he seemed to know what I’d been thinking.

After a pause, Raven spoke again. “One reason vampires were so despised after the Queen’s reign is that my kind had always allied with her. We sided with her because she allowed us to hunt—it added to the sense of fear among her subjects, a fear that she exploited for her gain. We also supported her because she was one of us.”

I thought about all the photos I’d ever seen of the late Queen. She’d always looked beautiful. And the same, I realized. Beautiful.

Ageless.

“Our President has done a lot for my kind, by setting up the blood banks, by trying to break down the barriers between my kind and yours. My kind hear the clock, and we fear it too.”

“Why does your kind fear the Pinnacle clock? You exist outside of time!”

Raven laughed—a surprised bark that seemed louder in the city’s silence. “I’ve never heard it described that way. You’re right, we don’t age, but we experience the passage of time, all the same.”

“You haven’t answered my question,” I pointed out.

I saw the lump in Raven’s throat bob as he swallowed. “That clock was linked to the Queen’s power. It stopped when her reign ended. Now it has begun again... Not just that, my kind hears all the city’s cogs starting to move once more. All the signs point in the same direction.”

“Signs of what?”

“That The Queen of Hearts is returning.”

I was shaking my head. "The late Queen is dead."

"She is a vampire. A vampire can die, but not easily. Trust me, the Queen was defeated, but she is not dead."

My mouth fell open as I gawked at Raven. Then I turned my face towards the Pinnacle again, and the relentless *ticking* filled my mind as I watched it.

"Let me take you home," Raven said, covering my hand on his elbow. "It has been a long night for you, I think."

We'd barely stepped off the square and onto Sixth Avenue, and were approaching the President's Palace when I saw a small painting of the white rabbit on a corner. It was sitting, watching me, as though waiting for me to notice it.

"What about the white rabbit?" I asked.

Raven raised one eyebrow. "You are more astute than I thought," he said.

He took my hand from his elbow and held it to his lips to kiss me farewell.

"This is where I leave you tonight," he said, looking at the guards who were opening the small door in the side gate to let me through. He pressed his lips together, as though debating whether to say anything more.

"Aren't you going to answer my astute question?" I said, gripping his fingers so he could not drop my hand.

"Not tonight," Raven replied.

"I heard the white rabbit is gathering the late Queen's supporters. You say she is back. Is he?"

"I can't tell you about the white rabbit," Raven said.

"Yet you use his symbol on your card? Why should I believe you?"

"I can't say any more," Raven insisted. He held up a hand to put a stop to my protests. "If you come to see me again, I might reconsider."

My eyes narrowed. "Why can't you tell me now?"

Raven tapped his fingers on his leg again, staring off into the distance, thinking. I held my breath, wondering if he was about to relent. He met my eye, but the friendly twinkle was absent. "I'll tell you more about the white rabbit, if you bring me information on our President's movements."

I glared at Raven. He stepped back, tipped his hat to me, then disappeared into the night.

21 AUGUST



Alice glared at the face of the pocket watch that I'd made for her, while she listened to a petitioner in the great hall of the President's Palace.

"It should never have received a permit," the petitioner grumbled. "His shop is only three doors from mine. It's undercutting my business."

"Rubbish. Our patronage overlaps. You can't handle a little competition," a woman stepped up to stand next to him, glaring at the petitioner, before she turned to Alice.

"My President," she started. "He's trying to shut me down because I make better cakes. I can't help it if customers want to eat my cakes and not his."

Alice rubbed at her forehead as she snapped the lid of the pocket watch shut. "There are rules around this kind of thing," she said, turning to Jack. "Aren't there?"

Jack hesitated, looking nervous. Alice's expression was thunderous.

"I'll consider your complaint and provide my ruling in due course," Alice said, her tone sharper than usual. She turned to Jack again. "Make a note of that. Find out what the laws say. Next!"

A small man stepped up, wringing his hands.

"You may speak," Alice said.

"My President, I know you are very busy. I wouldn't come to you if I didn't think—"

"Yes, yes," Alice said. "Get on with it."

"Yesterday, I saw a Heart marching in Diamonds Quarter. I was just going about my business—everyone was—when the Heart attacked

someone. In broad daylight. I knew him—a young apprentice in the Guild. He fought it off, but...” the small man’s mouth turned down at the corners. He clasped his hands in front of his chest, as though in prayer. “Something must be done. They’ll kill someone if they’re not stopped. My President, where are they coming from?”

Alice shifted in her seat, surprised by the direct question. She tucked her hair behind her ears—the gesture of a small girl—and a mannerism I knew showed her stress. “I’m aware of the Hearts,” she raised her voice to address everyone in the hall. “I am taking every measure to get them under control.”

“Why are they here? Where did they come from? Is the Queen coming back?” The questions spilled out of the petitioner’s mouth, and a ripple of murmurs spread around the hall.

Alice smoothed her hair behind her ears again. She raised her voice over the chatter. “Do not panic. I’m taking every measure to ensure the safety of everyone in this city.”

The chatter only increased in volume. Alice turned to Jack; her lips pressed into a thin line.

I stood near the entrance to the great hall, hoping to get a few minutes of Alice’s time. I’d promised not to tell her about the people living in the tunnels—and I didn’t want to get them into any further trouble—but it troubled me that Raven wanted to know about Alice’s movements. For what purpose? I was still sure he had links to the white rabbit who was gathering supporters. If that was true, then his interest in Alice was a threat. What else could it be?

As Alice spoke to Jack, she noticed me across the room and beckoned me with a wave of her hand.

“Dismiss everyone,” Alice ordered Jack, who was nodding his head. “Fetch the Head of Security. I want a strategy to deal with these Hearts. They cannot roam the city. Tell him—” Alice looked up as I approached. “Ivy. I hope you’re feeling better?”

“Much better,” I assured her. “Mother, I was wondering whether I might talk to you about something.”

Alice closed her eyes, exhaling. “I am very busy with the menace of these Hearts.” Alice’s voice contained a note of caution. “I will give any proposal you have due attention. Another time.”

“But Mother, I think—”

“I don’t have time right now.” Alice snapped, glaring at me.

Jack shuffled his feet, then moved away to give us some privacy. Alice rubbed her forehead.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sure whatever you wish to bring to my attention is very important. I *will* consider it. At. Another. Time.”

I bit back my protest, then nodded my acquiescence. I was about to leave when Alice reached out to take my hand.

“Be careful. The Hearts used to be dangerous. Until we bring them under control, I’d prefer it if you didn’t wander the city at night.”

My eyes widened, remembering Raven’s promise to reveal the secret of the white rabbit—if I visited him again. Although I had no intention of giving him any information about Alice.

“But—”

“You’re a grown woman, but you are still my daughter,” Alice said, giving me a stern glare. “Please, be careful.”

I signed again before nodding.

Alice turned back to Jack, leaving me feeling both shackled and empty-handed.



The midday sunlight beat down on the street, and my clothes clung damply against my body even after walking only the short distance to Chesh’s shop.

His face lit up when he saw me, and he skirted around the counter to fold me into an embrace so tight that he lifted me off the ground and spun me in a circle.

“So good to see you!” he said as he put me down, still grinning from ear-to-ear. “When I sought help the other night..., I began.

Chesh looked like he’d swallowed something sour. He grasped my hands, shaking them as his eyes filled with tears. He took a deep, shuddering breath. “Pearl told me you were fine. I can see for myself that you are as beautiful as ever.” He leaned forward as though sharing a secret. “I came back for you, but you’d disappeared.”

I pulled my hands out of his, uncomfortable as the conversation brought back the memories of the attack. Raven and the people in the tunnels had consumed my thoughts for most of the day.

“I’m fine,” I said, even as I touched my throat, where the vampire had almost bitten me.

Chesh’s face split into a relieved grin. “Excellent.” He tugged my hands. “In that case, come and see what I’ve been doing since the last time I saw you.”

I let him lead me into the workshop at the back. “Though your absence left a hole in my life, I haven’t been idle.” He winked at me. “In fact, I’ve made modifications to the steam bikes that will lengthen their range.”

“Are you taking me for another ride?”

“No,” Chesh replied, but his eyes brightened when he came to stand next to the hover vehicle he’d shown me the last time I’d visited his workshop. “I had a breakthrough!”

He put his goggles on, then stood on the metal plate of the hover, gripping the handles with both hands. “I think I’ve got it working.”

The hover whizzed and hummed as it lifted. His grin grew wider as the vehicle hovered about a foot off the ground.

I held my breath and watched, waiting for something to go wrong.

“Don’t give me that look, Ivy. This time, I’ve done it,” he said. “It’s all about the weight distribution. Last time, it was hovering before I stepped on. This time—”

The machine vibrated so that Chesh gripped so hard to the handles that his knuckles turned white. Before he could step off, it belched black smoke, then shot another foot up into the air, before crashing back onto the floor, with Chesh tumbling down beside it.

I winced, then held a hand out to my friend. “Are you all right?”

He sighed, then crouched to peer at what now looked like a harmless piece of bent-up metal.

“It was an improvement, right?” he asked, his expression hopeful.

I shrugged one shoulder. “You were in the air for longer this time.”

“That’s right.” Chesh grinned, then ran a finger over the machine as his expression sobered. “I can’t work out why it’s doing this. After the last time, I pulled it apart, replaced the broken cylinder head—the cause of the explosion. I can’t tell why the cylinder head came off...” He ran a hand through his hair, making it stand on end.

I nodded, but as Chesh talked about the machine, I remembered the events of the previous night again.

Every time I thought about the Thackery family, now living in the tunnels underneath the city, I flushed with shame. Raven hadn't blamed me for putting the Thackery's into poverty, but I felt responsible for their current circumstances. How many other people had I condemned to such a life? The guilt gnawed at me. Raven said I could help people by helping him, but how could I betray Alice? What would Raven and the white rabbit do to her if I passed along the information they wanted? Alice spent her life working for the good of our citizens. It wasn't fair to put her in danger for something that wasn't her fault.

I sighed, leaning against the workbench.

"Did you hear me?" Chesh frowned in concentration.

I blinked, trying to remember what we'd been talking about.

Chesh stood, putting one hand on the hover as he turned to face me. "Come on, I know you know what's wrong with it. Just tell me."

"You'll regret it," I warned. "You said you wanted to fix it yourself. Give yourself some time to work it out."

"If you don't want to do this, then don't let me keep you," Chesh said. He folded his arms across his chest, and I could tell my inattention annoyed him.

"I was just thinking," I murmured.

Chesh raised an eyebrow. "That much was obvious. I assume you're not consumed by ways of getting this heap of junk to work?" He threw a rag at the hover. "What have you been working on then?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Whenever you have that expression on your face, you're trying to figure out a puzzle—usually related to a machine, or a clock. Which is it?"

"Neither—though it is a puzzle."

"Are you going to tell me, or do I have to guess?"

"Do you remember the reason we returned to the Spades Quarter?"

Chesh frowned, shaking his head.

"To buy a hat for Pearl—remember?"

Chesh shrugged.

"I went back to the hat shop."

The blood drained from Chesh's face. "By yourself? What were you thinking?"

I held up my hands to placate him. "I'm fine, Chesh. I..." I hesitated, wondering how much to tell him. Then I scolded myself. He was my best

friend. We didn't keep things from each other. "Do you remember going to *The Tea Party* last week? Someone left me a card. I saw him again—it turns out he's a milliner who owns that hat shop. So, I visited him—"

"Only a vampire would have a shop in the Spades Quarter," Chesh said. "Please don't tell me this chap is a vampire."

I shrugged one shoulder.

Chesh started shaking his head. "No hat could be so beautiful that you should risk your life for it. Pearl wouldn't want a hat if you bought it with your life, no matter how lovely."

"I wasn't in danger," I replied.

"A thirsty vampire attacked you in the Spades Quarter only days ago," Chesh's eyes flashed. "I'm your friend, and I've roamed this city with you, gone to bars and parties with you, but I'm telling you now that you cannot wander around in the vampire quarter at night. Not by yourself—and I'm not going there again. Not after last time."

"That's not what I was trying to tell you," I said, frustrated that Chesh wasn't listening. "The gentleman—"

"The blood-sucking vampire," Chesh interrupted.

I pursed my lips. "The *gentleman* showed me—"

"You went somewhere with him?" Chesh slammed his hand on the bench. "Honestly, Ivy, you're smarter than this. I've never known you to lose your senses over a man, no matter how handsome he was. Now you're following a vampire around—"

"I'm not following him around. This is not about his looks. You're not listening to me—"

"No, and I refuse to listen to any more of this nonsense. Promise me you won't do anything so stupid ever again."

I glared at Chesh, lifting my chin. "You're my friend. Not my keeper."

Chesh hesitated a moment, his eyes flashing. "If you don't promise to stay away from the vampire quarter, I'll... I'll tell your mother. Everything."

My mouth went dry as I took in Chesh's words. I reeled back, as though physically struck by his words. Chesh's face fell, and he took a step forward, reaching out for me. I stepped back again, and he stopped, still out of reach. "I only want the best for you. If you can't see how dangerous he is..."

I spun around and marched out of the shop.



I stood outside the Emporium, clenching my fists into the fabric of my skirts. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then exhaled.

Chesh can't stop me. I'm an adult. I'll go wherever I like whenever I like.

My furious thoughts were crowded out by the memory of Alice's words, ringing in my head like a bell: *"I'd prefer it if you didn't wander the city at night. You're a grown woman, but you are still my daughter."*

I let my chin fall to my chest as the breath went out of my resistance. If I visited Raven again, I'd not only be out at night, against Alice's wishes, but I might also have to give up information about my mother. Then there was the strange pull that I still felt toward Raven. I felt torn in two—I didn't want to betray Alice or cause her to worry, but I couldn't stay away from Raven either.

And then there was the puzzle of the white rabbit. Raven might know the answer, and I needed to solve it.

The door swung open behind me.

"Ivy?" Chesh laid a hand on my shoulder.

I hesitated before turning to stare up into his green eyes, which lacked their usual brightness. One of his dimples sunk deeper as he gave me a rueful expression. He turned the wrench he was still holding over and over in his hands.

"I'm not apologizing," I said when he said nothing.

The rueful smile dropped away, and Chesh's expression was serious again. "Nor I."

"I'm not a child. I'm not *your* child."

"I don't think of you as a child," Chesh said. "You're a woman. You're... my friend. I care about you. I can't ignore it when I see you doing something—"

I held up my hand. "I'm not arguing with you. You've made your point."

Chesh shook his head. I bunched my fists in my skirts again, expecting another argument. I prepared to launch into my defense. This time it was Chesh who held up his hand to stop.

"At least, tell me you've heard my opinion, and you'll think about it."

I pursed my lips, reluctantly nodding. At that, Chesh smiled, producing his dimples again. He winked.

“In that case, let’s not talk about this anymore. I don’t want to fight with you.”

I nodded, then turned to walk home.

“Wait a moment,” Chesh ducked back inside the store, and when he came out again, he’d left his wrench inside, and put on a tweed coat over his shirt and vest. He wore a bowler hat on his head.

“Let me walk you home?”

“I don’t need—”

Chesh rolled his eyes. “I know you don’t, but I like to spend time with you, and it is my pleasure to accompany my lady to her place of residence.”

I laughed, rolling my eyes at him, but we fell into step as we walked the well-trodden streets toward the Palace.

We wandered at a dawdle. In the background, the clock’s *ticking* was an unrelenting sound. I let my eyes and my thoughts wander.

We were coming around a corner when a metallic scraping noise from above drew my attention upward. I sheltered my eyes from the sunlight that was still peeping over the rooftops as it made its afternoon descent to notice what I’d always thought were nothing more than metal decorations along the rooflines of the buildings.

“What are you looking at?” Chesh asked, touching my hand.

“Do you see that?”

Chesh peered up, squinting as he did so. “What am I looking at?”

“The decorations on the roof there—look! They’re moving.”

“So they are,” Chesh murmured.

“They appear to be cogs,” I said, shifting position so that the glare of the sun didn’t impede my vision.

“On a rooftop?” Chesh shook his head, looking away. “It’s just a trick of the light,” he said, taking my arm.

I let him lead me away but looked up at the cogs on the rooftop again. It was no optical illusion—they were moving—but why would anyone put cogs on the tops of the roofs?

I tripped over a loose cobblestone, and Chesh caught my arm to stop me from falling.

“Thank you,” I murmured. Chesh patted my hand.

When I regained my balance, I glimpsed a painting of the white rabbit, appearing to peer out from behind a cart selling flowers. I stopped, staring at it, wondering if it was taunting me.

“Are you looking at those flowers?” Chesh asked. I blinked. I was facing the flower cart. I started to shake my head, but Chesh was already moving to engage the flower merchant in conversation.

The cart sold an array of different flowers from all over the Twelve Kingdoms. One was bright, with large petals that looked like someone had thrown purple, orange, and blue paint at them, leaving irregular spots of colors overlapping each other.

“What would you recommend for a beautiful lady?” Chesh asked the florist. She pointed to a bunch of tulips with a sign that said they were the Queen’s Tulips from the Kingdom of Floris.

Chesh gave me a sideways glance. The merchant looked over too. “It seems she likes something more unusual,” she said. “That is a Speckled Weeper, a rare native to The Forge that grows along the northern border.”

“It’s unusual and beautiful,” I murmured, reaching out a finger to stroke the petals.

“Don’t touch!” the woman snapped, her hand darting out to bat my hand away. I blinked in surprise. “The petals are poisonous,” she explained. “And it’s a flytrap, but it’s got sharp teeth along the rim of the petals that will take half your finger off if you touch it.”

I stepped away from the plant.

Chesh gave her a look. “I don’t believe you,” he said.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Watch this,” she said. She touched the middle of the large petals with a stick. The Speckled Weeper snapped shut with alarming speed, and with such force that it snapped the twig in half.

Chesh laughed, his eyes sparkling. “I’ll take it. A present for a beautiful lady who might—if provoked—react with a fury that could leave you without a limb!”

I rolled my eyes, assuming he was only joking, but when I returned to the Palace, I was the new owner of a Speckled Weeper.

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“Can one overfeed it, do you think?”

Pearl broke off a small amount of cheese and lobbed it towards the Speckled Weeper. As the cheese made contact, the plant’s petals snapped closed. Pearl shrieked with laughter, as she had the last five or six times she’d done the same thing.

“What are you doing?” Alice walked into the dining room and sat down to breakfast. It was the first time in a week we’d eaten together.

“Chesh gave Ivy a man-eating plant,” Pearl said, winking at me. “Isn’t that romantic?”

I glared at her. “It wasn’t romantic. He doesn’t feel that way about me.”

“Men only give women flowers when they’re in love with them,” Pearl replied. “They’re always giving me flowers.” She tossed her hair and lobbed another piece of cheese at the Speckled Weeper, then giggled.

“Stop playing with your food,” Alice glared at her. “Anyone would think you were a child, not a grown woman. You should try being serious now and then. It would do you some good.”

Pearl rolled her eyes. “You two are both serious enough for the three of us.”

Alice reached for the bread and cheese when Jack entered with an armful of the day’s newspapers, and a red rose that he held between two fingers.

“Another rose for you, Madam President,” he said, and nodded towards the vase on a side table that now held about a dozen roses. “Shall I put it with the others?”

“Is there a note with it?” I asked.

Jack shook his head, then put the rose into the vase with the others and turned back to Alice.

"I've some urgent matters for your morning briefing, Madam President," he said, hovering a few steps from the table while eyeing the food.

"I haven't even eaten breakfast," Alice complained. "I suppose you can brief me while I eat." She glanced at Pearl and me. "You don't mind, do you, girls?"

"Yes," Pearl answered, but Alice silenced her with a glare, then waved at her advisor to get started.

"Your morning newspaper, Madam President," Jack said, putting the latest edition of *The Forge Hart* on the dining table.

"Just summarize it for me, would you?" Alice asked Jack. "Reading while eating gives one indigestion."

When Alice didn't take the newspaper, I reached over to slide it towards me. Jack eyed me, then turned his attention to Alice. "The *Forge Hart* is reporting more attacks this morning."

I glanced over the front page, which led with an article about the Hearts being sighted again. When I flicked over the page, I noticed an opinion piece speculating about the causes of the return of the Hearts.

"The editor, Elias Doyle, wrote in his column he thinks the Queen's return is imminent," I interrupted, looking up at Alice.

Alice sat back in her chair and brushed her hair behind her ears. "She's dead!"

I remembered what Raven had said about the Queen of Hearts being a vampire. "How do you know, Mother?"

Alice pursed her lips, giving me a glare that told me not to ask any more questions. Jack hurried on. "More people are locking themselves in their houses and stockpiling food. There's also been an increase in people reporting their neighbors for esthetic code violations. Our inspectors are rushed off their feet dealing with minor code infractions."

"Why?" I asked. Jack looked at me, then back to Alice, as though seeking permission to answer.

Alice sighed, pushing her food around on her plate, before settling her knife and fork on the porcelain with a tinkling sound.

"Like this Elias Doyle, people believe the late Queen of Hearts is returning. During her reign, any mark of imperfection was punishable by

death. She was very strict about the esthetic code. She chopped off people's heads in the most severe cases or turned them over to her vampires to feed upon if the infraction was only slight. It terrified people. Now, they're worried she might come back, so they're trying to put themselves in a position to deflect attention from themselves. If they accuse someone else of esthetic violations, the Queen's wrath might not turn on them."

"But you don't believe the Queen is coming back?" I asked.

Alice glared at me again. "The late Queen," she corrected. "The dead rarely come back."

My Speckled Weeper snapped its petals shut with a loud clicking sound, and Alice and I started at the noise.

Pearl shrugged when Alice turned to glare at her. "What? You were both starting to sound boring again."

"There are several petitioners already waiting to see you in the great hall, Madam President," Jack interjected, just as Alice opened her mouth to reply to Pearl. Alice groaned, and the chair scraped over the floorboards as she stood. She was almost out of the door when she looked around. "Oh, Ivy, I wonder whether you might do something for me today?"

I glanced up from my plate. "Yes, Mother."

"I'm supposed to visit the perimeter wall. My regular visit. Unfortunately, I won't get through the list of petitioners in time. Are you feeling well enough to make the visit in my stead?"

I smiled. "Of course, Mother."

"Of course, Mother," Pearl mimicked my words in a high voice, rolling her eyes and tossing her hair. I glared at her before taking my leave from the dining room to change into something more appropriate for a perimeter visit.



The wind tugged at the strands of my hair. Much shorter now, it was impossible to tie back from my face, and though I'd grown to like the style—Pearl was right, it suited me—the wind now whipped the short hair into my eyes. I stood on top of the Twelfth Tower, which looked out to the north, beyond the boundaries of Melfall and out over the lands of The Forge as they stretched out to the horizon.

I'd never been beyond Melfall, The Forge's capital city, though Alice took a tour through the countryside every couple of years. She said there were many little villages scattered throughout the land, though none were visible from my vantage point. In the foreground were rolling hills, and in the far distance, I could see hazy mountains, barely tipped with white in the heat of summer. Though I couldn't see it now, I knew that if I visited the Seventh and Eighth Towers, I would see to the coast to the south and the glittering sea beyond.

I'd walked along the perimeter wall before; the first time was when I was a child and had argued with Alice about the size of the sky. I'd said the sky was small—I'd told her it was the width of my hand. She'd given me a curious look, and I'd held up my hand above me, to show her that it blocked out the sky over the width of the buildings that lined Sixth Avenue. Alice had tried to explain that the sky was much larger and that in the city we couldn't see it so well because the buildings got in the way. I didn't understand her, and so she'd taken me for a visit to the perimeter wall.

I remembered stepping out onto the wall-walk and trailed my fingers along the ramparts, as I craned my neck to see above me. With my other hand, I'd held it up to the sky, amazed that my hand covered only the slightest section of the sky. I had gazed around at the azure ceiling that spread out in every direction to meet a hazy horizon in the far distance.

Many times, I'd returned to the perimeter wall, and climbed the stone steps to one of the towers—there were twelve towers in all, each marking the end of twelve straight avenues that ran from the marketplace around the clock tower like the spokes of a wheel. I'd now walked every section of the wall that encircled the city, at least once, but I'd never tired of this view.

This time, though, I wasn't here to enjoy the view or to walk the wall-walk. I was here to get a report from the Captain of the President's Guard, or city guard as people knew them, whose job was to patrol the perimeter and guard against any threat to the city.

Alice formed the Guard at the start of her presidency, to replace the robotic Hearts who had formed the late Queen's army.

Remembering Raven's story, an unwelcome thought crept into my head. *She might still be alive. No, it's not possible.* I shuddered.

"Miss. Rowntree?" The Captain stood to attention next to me, touching his forefinger to his forehead in salute.

“Captain Walsh,” I gave a curtsy, and he relaxed his stance somewhat, though he still stood straight under his plate armor, with his helmet tucked under his arm as he greeted me. His hair was damp, and beads of sweat had formed on his upper lip.

“You must be hot in all that,” I said. “Doesn’t the President’s Guard have a cooler uniform for the summer?”

“No, miss,” Captain Walsh said. “It’s too dangerous to wear anything but full armor when on patrol.”

I glanced down at the cotton vest I wore over my corset and shirt.

“No need to worry yourself, Miss Rowntree,” Captain Walsh added. “You are under my protection. I would shield you with my life if it came to it.”

“Thank you, Captain,” I replied. “Do you expect an imminent attack? I understand we have accords of peace with each of the other eleven kingdoms. Where are we expecting this attack to come from?”

“Expect the unexpected,” Captain Walsh said, turning to stare at the horizon. “We must never neglect our duty to our President nor to Melfall.” His words boomed.

Several guards saluted as they marched past, also in full plate armor. When they had gone, Captain Walsh leaned toward me to whisper. “Between us, Miss. Rowntree, you’re right. The Forge has no enemies and nothing to fear. There has not been an attack on Melfall, or The Forge, these last eighteen years, since the Queen’s defeat.”

At the mention of the Queen, the breath left my lungs. Still, I forced a smile. “That’s reassuring, Captain.”

“However, we must be diligent. I drill that mantra into all the guards under my command. We are ever mindful of our duty.”

“I will include that in my report to our President.”

Captain Walsh smiled, looking pleased with himself. “I’m at your service. What would you like to see?”

“What does Madam President do when she visits the perimeter?”

“Madam President takes a tour of the wall-walk, greeting the soldiers. It’s encouraging for the troops to have a moment with one’s superiors, you know.”

“I’ll do that then,” I said.

Captain Walsh led me along the wall-walk, and I spoke to several pairs of guards standing watch at regular sections of the parapets. I made small

talk, learned that most of them had served on the President's Guard for only a few years, and complimented them on the gleam of their armor. We strolled in the full glare of the sunshine. By the time we came to the First Tower, my shirt was damp, and my hair was clinging to the sheen of perspiration on my skin.

"No need to continue," Captain Walsh said. "Word will spread about your visit. You need not chat with every man on the wall, no matter how much they'd like to bend the ear of a beautiful, young woman."

I blushed, thanking him for the compliment.

"Shall we take the covered walk back to Twelfth Tower? I think you might prefer to be out of the sun?"

I hesitated, turning my face towards the sky to appreciate the limitless azure above. As if in answer, the wind whipped my hair again, and I turned my back on the view to cover my face.

We were about to take the stairs, when I glanced in the other direction, over the city rooftops.

I noticed the cogs that lined the apex of the rooftops and halted. I covered my eyes with one hand to shield them from the glare, squinting at the sight. From this vantage point, I knew the cogs were moving.

"Captain Walsh?"

He turned to me.

"Do you know what they are?" I pointed at the cogs on the rooftops.

"I'm not sure what you mean, miss?"

"There is machinery on those rooftops. See there? There are similar moving cogs on most of the roofs."

Captain Walsh peered out. "I see them."

"I'm sure they're moving," I said, leaning out over the inner ramparts, wishing I could get a closer look. "But what are they for? What do they do?"

Another puzzle.

Captain Walsh was less interested. He straightened and turned away. "Mere decoration, I'm sure. Every citizen of Melfall devotes themselves to the esthetic glory of our city. Beauty is the goal."

I pressed my lips together. "It's moving—like a machine. Nobody builds machines for beauty. They're built for a purpose."

"I'm merely a captain. You're a much better judge of esthetics. In any case, the eyes of the President's Guard should always focus on what is

beyond the perimeter. I spend little time scrutinizing our own citizens. Shall we?"

He gestured towards the steps that descended the first tower. I reluctantly turned from the rooftop cogs and took the steps back to street level.



A trumpet bellowed. Captain Walsh saluted, followed by the guards who stood in a line behind him.

"You have honored us with your visit, Miss. Rowntree," Captain Walsh said. "Please give our respects to Madam President."

"I will, Captain." I smiled at the guards standing as still as statues. Then I noticed something unusual.

Behind them, at the place where Twelfth Avenue met the Twelfth Tower, the gates in the perimeter wall—one of only two entrances to Melfall—stood open.

I hesitated, frowning at the sight.

"Do we get much overland trade?" I asked Captain Walsh.

"I beg your pardon?"

I pointed to the open gates. "I would have thought it is harder to bring goods by the northern roads. Doesn't most of our trade come by ship?"

Captain Melfall didn't even glance at the gates. "Those gates are not open to admit a caravan of traders."

"Oh?" I tilted my head. "Why would the farmers travel so far when it isn't a market day?"

"It's not to admit the farmers either."

He shifted his weight, and I saw the hair sticking to the moisture on his forehead.

"Then why are the gates open?"

"The gates to our city are always open."

I frowned. "They are?"

"These gates have not closed for eighteen years."

"You leave them open all the time?"

"That's correct."

I stared around, trying to understand. “You just told me that the President’s Guard was always vigilant against an attack. Yet our gates remain open? Always?”

Captain Walsh shrugged his shoulders, though faint pink blotching rose up his neck. “The Forge has no enemies, Miss. Rowntree. There is no need to close the gates. That’s what Madam President said.”

I stared at the gates that had stood open for eighteen years. I was still shaking my head when I turned away.

“Thank you,” I murmured. Then, abruptly, I remembered something and turned back.

“Captain Walsh?”

He stood straight. “Yes, Miss. Rowntree?”

“Have you ever heard of the white rabbit?”

The captain frowned. “The white rabbit? Of course, I have.”

I blinked. “You have?”

“You’re probably too young to remember the white rabbit. A supporter of the Queen, and a member of her inner circle.”

“Have you heard rumors that he has returned?”

Captain Walsh shook his head. “Nobody has seen the white rabbit since the Queen... well, since your mother became Madam President—long may she reign.”



Moving parts on every rooftop. That’s what I saw as I retraced my steps along Twelfth Avenue towards the President’s Palace. I kept my eyes focused on the line of the roofs. Had those parts always been moving? If so, why was I only noticing them now?

I cursed myself for my previous inattention. How much happened in this city I was unaware of? I’d grown up in Melfall. I’d been nowhere else. I thought I knew the city well, but the last couple of weeks had shown me parts of the city that I never knew existed.

First, I’d discovered people living underneath Melfall. Now, there were machines atop every rooftop, and I couldn’t be sure it hadn’t always been so. Surely, I would have noticed?

I bumped into someone on the street and stumbled. My top hat fell from my head and rolled into the middle of oncoming traffic.

“Watch where you’re going!” an older woman’s voice scolded me.

I waved an apology as I dodged a steam-powered carriage motoring along the road. Its horn blared, and the driver slammed on the brakes, before brandishing a fist at me as he rolled by.

I waved another apology, setting my hat back on my head. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of red. It drew my eyes into the alley leading off the busy avenue.

A Heart.

Without taking my eyes off the robotic card, with the mark of the late Queen’s patronage on its chest, I stepped off the curb again to dash towards it. More shouts and blaring horns followed, but I ignored them all.

I stepped into the deserted alley, my footsteps clattering over the irregular cobblestones to echo off the walls of the buildings as they loomed overhead.

The Heart was marching in the opposite direction, keeping a regular pace, holding a spear in one hand.

“Stop!” I yelled out as I dashed after it.

The Heart didn’t stop or turn. It kept up its steady pace along the alley. It came to a corner, jerked to turn around it, then continued without pause.

I gathered up my skirts, hoisting them above my knees, as I dashed forward. Breathing heavily, and wishing I hadn’t laced my corset so tight this morning, I rounded the corner after the Heart.

“Wait!” I heard my voice echo off the walls. “I need to talk to you!”

The Heart didn’t pause, and I wondered whether it could hear me. All the stories I’d heard about the Hearts told they were programmed to respond to verbal commands, to answer simple questions, and undertake complex actions. This one, however, wasn’t reacting as I’d expected.

I forced myself to run faster. The Heart marched at a regular pace, so I caught up before the Heart reached the next corner.

I yelled out again, before putting a hand on the Heart’s spear arm and coming around to stand in front of it.

“I’m talking to you,” I said and struggled to catch my breath. I looked into its robotic face, getting a good look at it. The body of the Heart was like a playing card, flat and rectangular, decorated in the Nine of Hearts

motif. Its arms and legs were modeled to appear human, and when I stared up into its face, a shiver ran down my spine.

The Heart had a face, smooth and devoid of expression, but its eyes were cameras that rolled around so it could “see.” I heard a faint hum as the camera swiveled to focus on me.

I swallowed down my uneasiness and raised my voice. “Nine of Hearts,” I addressed it, “What are you—?” I said, but the Heart reached forward and grabbed the front of my shirt. It hauled me upwards, without effort, so that my feet were kicking in the air.

“Hey, what are you—?” I repeated, louder this time, as I tugged at the Heart’s fist where it bunched my shirt in its fist. I searched for a panel on its chest or a latch that I might open to see how the robot worked. Perhaps I’d even be able to disable it and take it back to the President’s Palace for further study. The Heart’s grip didn’t loosen in the slightest as I struggled, and I used my most commanding voice. “Let me go!”

At first, I thought the Heart hadn’t heard me, but then I hurtled through the air before slamming against the brick wall of the building across the street.

A stab of pain tore through my head. I blinked, as black shadows flickered at the edge of my vision. I crouched on the footpath, leaning against the wall and holding my head in my hands.

When I’d gathered my wits to look around again, the Heart had disappeared.

23 AUGUST



The ‘closed’ sign hung on the door of *Thackery’s Fine Antiques*. I peered into the window, hoping I’d see some evidence of movement inside, some sign that Mr. Thackery was remedying the code violations I’d used to withdraw his license for operation. The shop was quiet, empty.

I closed my eyes.

“I have children to feed,” Mr. Thackery had said when I’d taken away his license. I heard the echo of those words now, and I couldn’t shake the heaviness that had lodged in my stomach when I’d visited the tunnels and seen how my strict adherence to the esthetic code had cost Mr. Thackery his livelihood, his home, and his family.

I leaned my forehead against the cool glass of the shop window, wondering what to do next.

I wondered if I could find the tunnel entrance without Raven, or if I should even try—perhaps these people would rather be left alone than to be confronted by the architect of their miserable existences? I touched my stomach as the heaviness persisted. I couldn’t do nothing, but how could I help them? How could I undo the damage I’d done?

I saw Raven’s face in my mind as I remembered his offer: *You can choose to help them*. I hung my head. I should help them, but I couldn’t betray Alice to do it.

I sighed, opening my eyes as I turned to leave. A movement snagged my attention from the corner of my eye. My gaze snapped back to the shop, and this time, I pressed my face against the glass to see past the window’s reflection.

Someone was inside.

I rapped at the door. The figure lurking in the back froze.

A moment passed.

Then the figure hurried out of sight.

“Spades,” I cursed underneath my breath and ran to the corner of the street to get around to the rear of the building to see if I could head the person off before they disappeared.

As I rounded the corner, I saw a mess of gray hair and the dirty suit that Mr. Thackery had been dressed in when I closed his shop.

“Mr. Thackery!” I yelled out and ran toward him.

Mr. Thackery turned, his eyes narrowing as he saw me. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

I came to a standstill a short way away from him, giving him space. “I wish to say—”

“I don’t want pity, girl,” Mr. Thackery sneered. “Not from you.”

I grasped my hands in front of my chest. “I just wanted to say...”

“What? You’re sorry? Is that it?” Mr. Thackery pushed a hand through the mess of his hair. “A little late for that, isn’t it? You took away my shop, my business—I spent years building it up, you know. It’s tough, in a place that only values shiny, new things, to encourage people to find beauty and value in things that are tarnished and imperfect. There’s character in things that have been used and passed from one person to the next. Every scratch and every dent tells a story. Few people in the Forge are interested in stories, though. All they want is the latest thing, as long as it’s shiny, beautiful, and perfect. That’s all people care about around here. Nothing’s changed. Not really. I remember what it was like before, under the Queen. Not that you’d understand—all you know is peace.”

I clasped my hands together, searching for the right thing to say. “Is there anything I can do? Anything you need?”

Mr. Thackery stared at me in disbelief, then snorted. “Apart from my life back? My daughter is on the verge of death, sick from the damp darkness of the tunnels. I lost my home because I couldn’t pay the rent. My business might not have succeeded, according to your esthetic measures, but I paid my way. Now...” Mr. Thackery turned away, fishing out a handkerchief from his pocket to dab at the moisture that had filled his eyes.

“When the Queen disappeared, I thought things would change.” He shook his head. “Things are just as bad now as they ever were. Mark my

words—”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

A set of footsteps made Mr. Thackery jerk. He looked around, wide-eyed, and shrank away from me. “It’s the Hearts! They’re coming.”

A jolt of fear tore through me, and I froze, listening for the sound. All I could hear, though, was the sound of footsteps a short way away. It didn’t have the steady robotic frequency of the Hearts.

“Mr. Thackery...” I reached out to touch his arm, to slow him down.

“Don’t say my name,” he hissed. “Don’t talk to me. I can’t be seen with you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s back. Or she will be soon.” Mr. Thackery turned away, hunching over as though trying to disappear under the worn collar of his coat as he moved along the back alley. I started after him.

“I only want to help you,” I called out.

“I can’t risk my family again. I won’t.”

I leaned against the wall, defeated, watching Mr. Thackery’s retreating figure as he hurried away.

It was only then that I noticed the painted form of the white rabbit on the wall opposite.



I ran a finger over the motif. A white rabbit with a black bow tie, black waistcoat, and its ears stuck out from under a top hat. It seemed to sniff the air, one paw curled up as though it was mid-stride.

My mind turned over the puzzle again. One of many that I just couldn’t stop thinking about.

Follow the white rabbit, the starving vampire had said when faced with his injured customer. Raven had promised to tell me more about the white rabbit if I brought him information about Alice’s movements. Perhaps, if I found the white rabbit for myself, I could solve the puzzle *and* keep Alice safe. I flipped open my pocket watch. There was plenty of daylight left. Still, I felt a twinge of regret at the thought of breaking my word to Alice. She’d only worry about my safety.

I studied the white rabbit motif again. *Follow the white rabbit.* The words echoed in my mind, and I wondered if they should be taken literally. I turned in the direction the white rabbit seemed to face and started walking, meandering along the narrow backstreet, searching for any hint of another painted rabbit.

I walked two blocks before seeing the painted tuft of a fluffy tail. I knelt down next to it and saw the body of the rabbit curving around the corner of the building. A smile touched my lips as I brushed my fingers against the painting. They came away tacky, smudged with white paint.

This rabbit was freshly painted.

I kept walking, keeping my eyes to the base of the buildings on each side of the street, determined not to miss the next clue.

I stopped on the corner, waiting for a steam carriage to pass by, before hurrying down the next block. Then, across the street, I saw another rabbit on the bottom of a wall.

I crossed the street to get a closer look, but as I bent over and brushed my fingers over the paint, I noticed that it had been hastily obscured with a few strokes of black. Was someone trying to obscure the clues? Or perhaps correcting the route?

I took my hand away, noticing that it left no residue of paint on my hands. Perhaps this marking was old? I wiped my hands together, looking back in the direction I'd come from. If I kept going, would I find another clue that way? Or should I turn the corner here?

"Are you all right, dear?"

I jerked, as an older woman put her hand on my arm. I'd been standing on the street corner, staring into space.

"Are you lost?" she asked.

I shook my head. I needed to decide. I was drawing too much attention by loitering in one place, staring around.

"Are you sure? These streets can be quite confusing, I find." The woman frowned, her hand still on my arm.

"No, I'm fine. I was just...looking for..." I clamped my mouth shut, stopping myself from revealing any more, then lifted my chin. I pried my arm away from her. "I was getting my bearings. I know where I'm headed. Thank you for your concern."

Without looking back, I left the obscured rabbit behind and walked back across the street to continue to follow the clues.



The white rabbit crouched next to an otherwise unremarkable door—this was the sign I’d been looking for.

Another white rabbit.

I walked toward the door, then threw a look over my shoulder. No one noticed me. I tapped on the door.

I waited, pleating the folds of my skirts between my fingers, but no one answered.

I turned my head and pressed my ear to the door, listening for any noise from inside. I couldn’t hear anything.

I stepped back, looking up at the windows of the first story. The curtains were drawn, but a movement caught my eye as one of them fluttered. I stared at the window, but the movement didn’t happen again.

I looked down at the white rabbit painting on the wall, lying down and looking at the doorway. So far, following the paintings of the white rabbit had led me here. Staring at the rabbit, I had the strongest feeling that I should step through the doorway.

I hesitated, wondering what to do. Then I turned the door handle. The door clicked open and

swung inward. I paused, expecting someone to call out or try to stop me.

Nothing happened.

I threw another glance over my shoulder as I stepped inside.

In the entrance hall, a large vase of sunflowers greeted me. I leaned closer to breathe in their scent but was startled by a crackling sound. A voice spoke:

“How did you get here?”

I jumped, spinning around to identify the voice, but I couldn’t see anyone. Then I peered at the sunflower, noticing the sunflower’s face move as I did.

“Did you say that?” I asked it, a blush rising to my cheeks. Was I talking to a flower?

“How did you find this place?” the voice spoke again. This time, I noticed a shiny surface in the center of the sunflower. A camera?

“I followed the white rabbit,” I replied.

“Well, why didn’t you say so? Take the stairs down one floor.”

Then the sound disappeared, and the sunflower tipped forward, as though bowing its head. Rejecting the urge to inspect the sunflower—to pull it apart to see how it worked—I walked past the side table and lay a hand on the staircase that wound downwards. I took the stairs one at a time, descending into what appeared to be a dark basement.

When I got to the bottom, a small strip of flickering light glowed underneath a doorway. I

paused, then pushed. The door swung open without resistance.

In the room, a line of people were standing against the far wall, looking pale. In the center, a man lay on a bench, while another bent over him.

As the door opened, everyone’s heads swiveled towards me.

The man bending over the bench straightened up. An older man with gray hair and a mustache and a stethoscope hanging around his neck put an eyeglass back over one eye as he peered at me.

“Emergency?” he asked.

I frowned, my eyes flickering to the person lying on the bench with his shirt laid open to reveal his bare chest. “I’m looking for the white rabbit.”

The man stared at me, then waved a hand. “Wait over there.” He turned his attention back to the unconscious, bare-chested man.

I hesitated a moment, then shuffled over to stand at the end of the line, leaning against the wall, as I watched. The man with the stethoscope appeared to be a doctor, though this was not the city hospital.

I watched him stitch a deep cut on the man’s open chest. Then, as the line shuffled forward, he examined a rash, pulled a tooth, treated an earache, cleaned and dressed an infected wound, and set a splint for a broken leg.

It was over an hour later, and I was the last in line when the doctor turned to me.

“What ails you, young lady,” the doctor asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” I replied. “I’m looking for the white rabbit.”

The doctor set his eyeglass into place as he took a step closer and peered at my face. "Why?" he asked.

I opened my mouth, then shut it again, at a loss for words. Why? "Because..."

Because I need to solve the riddle about the white rabbit. Because I want to find out if the rumors about the white rabbit recruiting supporters for the Queen of Hearts are true. Because I have to know if the Red Queen is really returning. Because I can't sacrifice Alice's safety.

And because I must find out more about Raven.

He frowned. "You're not ill?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Why were you told to seek out the white rabbit?"

"Nobody told me. I just followed the signs."

The doctor rubbed his hands down the front of his shirt. "What's your name, young lady?"

I hesitated, wondering whether I should give a false name. Then I decided against it. I wanted information from this man. I would not get him to trust me by lying to him.

"Ivy Rowntree, sir," I replied, bobbing a polite curtsy.

"Rowntree?" The doctor looked me over, interested. "Alice Rowntree's daughter?"

I nodded. "Do you know my mother?"

A blush rose to the doctor's cheeks. He looked away and popped out his eyeglass to clean it with the tail of his shirt, before putting it back in his eye again. "I did, once. A long time ago. How old are you, young lady?"

I frowned. "I turned eighteen this year," I replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Eighteen," the doctor murmured, and his gaze drifted away to a point in the distance. "You don't look like your mother."

I pursed my lips. "No, my twin sister is more like my mother," I replied. I'd always assumed that I take after my father, though I'd never met him, and Alice had never spoken of him.

The doctor gawked. "Twins?" His voice hitched a little higher. He turned away and busied himself with his instruments, picking things up to clean them before putting them down again.

"So, do you know?" I asked when he said nothing else.

"Know what?"

"I need to find the white rabbit. Do you know where he is?"

“Oh,” the doctor turned back to me. “I’m the white rabbit,” he said and held out a hand. “Dr. Wit Lapin, at your service.”



Dr. Lapin clasped my hand, then motioned toward the door.

“Please, come upstairs,” he said. “It’s not very comfortable down here. I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

I followed Wit up a flight of stairs to the first-floor landing, then through a door and into a small sitting room. From brief glimpses through other open doorways, I saw several other people who appeared to be living there too. They were all pale, with dark smudges under their eyes, and threadbare, patched clothes.

Wit bade me sit, and I settled myself in one of two armchairs—its material worn down almost to nothing on the armrests as he poured the tea. As I took the saucer, chipped on the edge, a plume of steam curled up from the cup. I sipped at it, the liquid burning my lips, as I tried to quiet the swirl of questions in my mind.

The cup chinked as I set it down on the saucer.

“So you *have* returned,” I said.

“You solved the riddle,” Wit said, at the same time. We looked at each other, then Wit sank into the armchair across from me. He rubbed his hands together, pursing his lips. “Many people here won’t remain, now that you have discovered our location.”

“Are they like the people in the tunnels? Homeless?” I asked.

Dr. Lapin frowned, leaning forward. “How do you know about them?”

I felt the warmth of a blush spread across my cheeks. “Mr. Cappello showed me.”

Wit’s eyes widened. “You know Raven?”

I nodded.

Wit studied me, his expression serious. “I suppose if Raven trusts you...”

There was a sharp knocking at the door, and another figure appeared in the doorway. It was a woman with long, wavy dark hair, wearing gold loop earrings and dressed in an unusual dress with long layers and oversized sleeves that flowed as she moved.

“Dr. Lapin, here you are!” she said, her eyes lighting up. “If you’ve finished seeing patients, may I speak with you? I need...”

Wit and I both stood, turning toward the woman in the doorway. She trailed off, suddenly noticing me.

“I didn’t know you had company.”

Wit cleared his throat. “Miss Rowntree, allow me to introduce you to Her Royal Highness, Princess Gaia of the Kingdom of Badalah. Princess, this is Ivy Rowntree, daughter of President Rowntree of The Forge.”

My eyes widened as I took in the princess. Her eyes had a gold ring around the iris, just like mine. I’d never seen it in anyone else before. I dropped into a deep curtsy. “Pleased to meet you, Your Royal Highness,” I murmured.

Gaia inclined her head. There was something strange about the way she looked at me, as though she knew me. Curiosity came over her features however, she turned to Wit. “I wish to continue our conversation from the other night if you have a moment?”

Wit glanced at me, clearly wondering whether he might escape our conversation. If I excused myself, he might have vacated this building by the time I returned. No, I couldn’t let this opportunity pass by.

“Dr. Lapin and I were in the middle of something important,” I said, looking the princess in the eye. Her golden-ringed irises had me on edge

Gaia looked surprised at my boldness. Then her cool mask slipped into place. “You’re the President’s daughter? The one who lives on the esthetic stipend? Or the daughter who enforces it?”

I gritted my teeth as a hot flush of shame washed over me. I couldn’t find the words to respond. Gaia turned back to Wit. “I know The Forge has many problems, but I am desperate. I need that potion.”

“Potion?” I narrowed my eyes, looking from Gaia to Wit, remembering the work he was doing downstairs. “What are you doing here, Dr. Lapin?” My voice rang out louder than it should have, over Gaia’s commanding tone.

Wit’s eyes widened, and he put a finger to his lips. As he did so, the sounds of movement and life in the rooms around us fell silent. Wit closed the door and bade me sit down. He found another chair for Gaia, and the man who stood behind her, who I’d barely noticed in the shadow of Gaia’s commanding presence—a bodyguard, I guessed.

“I knew your mother, once,” Wit started, wiping his eyeglass with his handkerchief, then putting it back into place. “She had a good heart, and I believe she will have brought you up with her capacity for compassion and her duty to the right thing. So I shall trust you, too. I must insist that you do not repeat these words to anyone who does not know the truth of the white rabbit. Or it will put more people than myself in danger. Do you understand?”

First Raven, and now Wit, demanded my silence before they would speak about their secrets. Narrowing my eyes, I hesitated, then nodded. “I’m not here to arrest anyone,” I said. “I came here because...” I thought about Alice and my determination that I wouldn’t put her in danger to satisfy my curiosity. Then I remembered Mr. Thackery and my attempt to see him this morning. “I’m here to make amends. I didn’t understand that my actions in upholding the esthetic laws had affected people in this way.”

“What did you think was happening to the people who lost their livelihoods?” Gaia asked, her tone acerbic. Her bodyguard touched her arm in a familiar gesture. Gaia looked at him. “I won’t pretend that Baladah is perfect—far from it. We have poverty enough in my kingdom, but at least we don’t pretend that the poor don’t exist.”

I swallowed, focusing on Wit and not looking at Gaia. “You were saying?”

Wit rubbed his hands together and settled back in his chair. “You may not know this, but I once worked for the Queen of Hearts. I was one of her loyal advisors. I had some training in the art of apothecary, and the Queen—the *former* Queen, I should say—engaged me to concoct beauty potions for her. She wanted to be the most beautiful woman in The Forge—every day, she was determined to be more beautiful than the day before. I was charged with making it happen.

“I had no choice, you see. I worked tirelessly for beauty, under the threat of death. The former Queen was prone to chopping off the heads of those who displeased her. So, I searched for the ingredient that would smooth her wrinkles, brighten her skin tone, shine her hair, and slim her figure. No sooner had I found one solution than I was told to find another, better, potion. She imagined imperfections, even when there were none.

“The former Queen always wanted things immediately, and I was always late.” Wit paused, looking down at the hands in his lap, the fingers now swollen in the joints, and the backs of his hands marked with age

spots. “At first, it was a privileged position. I lived a life of luxury, as long as I stayed in the Queen’s good graces. That was hard enough. Then I tired of the work. I desired to help the people—the ill or injured. The Queen shunned these people and forced them into the fringes of society. Or beheaded them.

“When Alice defeated the Queen, and she disappeared, I was free.” Wit’s eyes lit up at the memory, and his voice became dreamy, as though in that moment, he was a long way away. “I was free to pursue the work I had always wanted to do. I left The Forge for a time,” Wit cast a furtive glance in my direction, then continued. “To continue my studies. I dreamed of becoming a doctor; to use my skills as an apothecary to help people. So, I did.” Wit smiled.

“Now, you treat the people of Melfall?” I asked.

Wit nodded. “I treat their ills and injuries, where I can.” He pulled at a thread on his waistcoat. “I ask for payment only where I know my patient has the means to pay, and only as much as they can afford. It is not a lucrative life, but I find it more fulfilling than living in the luxury afforded me by the Queen.”

I looked at Wit, as though seeing him again for the first time. He wore threadbare clothes, with loose threads and patches on the elbows. His gray hair was messy, with unruly curls, too long and not tamed into a ponytail as worn by most of the gentlemen of Melfall. Wrinkles lined his face, and there were dark smudges under his eyes. Still, when he smiled, his eyes sparkled, and the lines of his face smiled too.

“How does Mr. Cappello fit into this?” I asked.

“Mr. Cappello brings patients to me.” Wit explained, with a shrug of his shoulders.

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

Wit rubbed his hands together. “I met Raven several years ago. I had returned to Melfall and was setting up a practice. I had thought it would be easy. I still had many connections from when I was in the Queen’s service, and I believed the wealthy of Melfall would pay enough for treatment, so I could treat the poor for free.”

Wit glanced at Gaia, who was also listening to the story with interest. “But the wealthy were after the beauty potions I had once brewed for the Queen. They objected to my treating the unbeautiful in the same consulting rooms, and waiting with them in the same waiting rooms—as though lack

of beauty was catching. They demanded I charge the same fees to my poorer clients. Several refused to pay at all when they found I treated a poor, dying man without charge. I refused to change, and, one by one, my wealthy clients abandoned me.”

Wit shrugged his shoulders. “It doesn’t bother me that those people chose to go elsewhere for medical treatment, but they tried to shut me down. They reported me so many times, and without money for upkeep, I fell afoul of the esthetic code. I was arrested several times, and I have to move my rooms to new locations constantly.

“How can I treat patients if people do not know how to find me when they need me? If they cannot contact me, how do I come to them in their time of need? It troubled me, knowing people were languishing without help, but what could I do? If I revealed myself, I was likely to be arrested. Then, I met Mr. Cappello.”

I leaned forward. The mention of Raven made my heart beat a little faster.



Dr. Lapin paused, getting up from his seat to walk across the room. He picked up the teapot.

“More tea?”

I looked at the cup I’d set down on the table, half-drunk and now cold. I shook my head. Gaia accepted.

“I don’t have a maidservant, Your Royal Highness,” Wit said as he poured the tea with shaking hands.

Gaia waved away his concern and gave him a smile as she sipped her tea. Her bodyguard also accepted a cup of tea with a nod to the doctor.

“Is there sugar?” The bodyguard asked. “You drink it very bitter in Melfall.”

Wit frowned, then looked around the room. “Yes, somewhere...ah, here it is.”

Wit offered a small sugar pot, but when he opened the lid, he frowned again to see it was almost empty. The man hesitated before taking a tiny amount of sugar to add to his tea.

“I seem to be running low,” Wit said, looking flustered as he rubbed a hand over the stubble of his beard.

Eager for Wit to continue the story, I pointedly redirected the conversation. “You were saying you met Mr. Cappello?” I asked.

Wit walked over to a window; he drew aside the curtain to peer outside.

“How much do you know about Mr. Cappello?” Wit asked.

“Is that the vampire who brought us here?” Gaia asked, interrupting.

Wit nodded. I glanced at her, surprised she’d met him too.

“A little. He’s a milliner and a vampire.” I trailed off.

Wit waited, and when I didn’t continue, he looked down to his lap as he took out his looking glass and rubbed at the lens with his handkerchief.

“Mr. Cappello knows the city almost better than anyone. When I met him, he offered me a partnership—he would bring me patients if I would treat them.”

Wit smiled, giving a little laugh. “It wasn’t much of a negotiation. I didn’t plan to give up my work with the ill and injured, so I accepted his help in that regard. He helps me to find new accommodations, when I need to move my treatment rooms. Mostly, though, he helps my patients to find me—the white rabbit was his idea, and his team of orphaned and abandoned children do the paintings.”

“He also delivers food for the poor when he can.”

I frowned, closing my eyes for a moment, trying to sort through all of this information. “What does Raven get out of this arrangement?”

Wit paused a moment, shrugging his shoulder. It appeared he was about to say something, before changing his mind. He continued to polish his eyeglass on his handkerchief.

“Why would a vampire help the city’s poor, sick people?” I asked again, certain that Wit knew something he wasn’t saying.

Wit shifted in his seat. “His people suffer too, you know. What with the blood shortage and—”

“What has this got to do with a blood shortage?” I interrupted.

“Well, not so much a shortage, but with the banks refusing to sell to vampires, it’s difficult...”

My mouth fell open. “The banks won’t sell blood to vampires? How do you know this?”

Wit paled. “Perhaps I’ve said too much. The point is...” Wit trailed off, and I opened my mouth to ask him another question when Wit spoke so

quickly the words seemed to pour from his mouth.

“Mr. Cappello wants to change things for everyone—he was planning something to force President Rowntree to listen to the unacknowledged people of this city. She has ignored us for too long.”

My head jerked. I stared at Wit. The petitioner to Alice had spoken about the white rabbit rallying the Queen’s supporters, but Wit seemed to imply something different. “*He* was planning? Not you?”

Wit frowned, confused. “I believe he sought you out to see if he could find a way to President Rowntree’s ear...?”

I sucked in a breath as Wit’s words registered. I stood, turning my back to walk towards the door.

I took a deep breath, then lifted my chin and straightened my shoulders. “I have taken up more than enough of your time, Dr. Lapin. I believe the princess needs your services now. Thank you for seeing me.”

Without waiting for a response from either Wit or the princess, I strode out of the door.

24 AUGUST



“Audrey?” I stood at the receptionist’s desk at the Fourth Street Blood Bank. “I have some additional questions. I need to speak to someone immediately.”

The receptionist blinked at me, then considered the full waiting room. “It’s Monday,” she said, by way of explanation. “It’s always busy on Mondays. People need money,” she whispered the last, then looked down at her paperwork.

“I’m not sure you understand, Audrey,” I said, not bothering to disguise the hard edge to my voice. “I have questions, and if you don’t answer them, I’ll shut down your operation. I’m sure these people would rather wait than be turned away.”

Audrey’s eyes widened as she looked up at me again, pushing her glasses back on her nose. “Inspector?” she said, peering at my badge “I didn’t recognize you at first, Inspector Rowntree. I’m sure somebody...I’ll just call—”

Audrey waved at the next person to come through the double doors. I recognized Miss Crispin and started towards her before waiting for Audrey to explain my presence.

“Miss Crispin? I have some urgent questions for you. You’ll understand.” I nodded towards the doorway to the blood donation rooms at the back.

Miss Crispin barely disguised a flicker of annoyance as she glanced at the packed waiting room.

“Of course, Inspector,” she said, her voice curt.

When the door swung closed behind her, she stood in the hallway and crossed her arms across her chest. “What can I help you with, Inspector? We’re very busy today, so it would be best...”

“I’ve heard a very disturbing rumor, Miss Crispin,” I said as I turned to face her, “and if I find it is true, I will be forced to report it to the highest authorities in The Forge.”

Miss Crispin paled. “I’m sure--”

“I’m sure it will be better for you if you cooperate. I would hate for you to get caught up in allegations of impropriety.”

“Impropriety?” Miss Crispin’s complexion lost even more color. “I don’t know—”

“Are you sure?” I said. “You see, every time I have been here, I have seen a waiting room full of people eager to donate their blood for the payment that this bank provides to them—a payment that is dependent on selling that blood donation to those that need it—our vampire population. The business model of this bank, of all the blood banks, is that they sell the blood to vampires for an agreed price and pay the donors who agree to provide blood for this purpose. Is my understanding correct?”

Miss Crispin nodded. She was clasping her hands in front of her chest, her knuckles white.

“And yet, I understand vampires are unable to get any blood from your blood bank.”

Miss Crispin swallowed. “The instruction came from our chief executive officer,” she said, looking over her shoulder. She reached out to me, pulling me into a doorway as she lowered her voice to a whisper. “We had no choice. We were to continue daytime collection operations as normal, but all nighttime operations ceased.”

“Why?”

Miss Crispin was shaking her head.

I glared at her. She looked around again.

“I... I heard a wealthy patron bought up all of the blood.”

My eyes narrowed. “Who?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

I glowered at her again, but Miss Crispin insisted. “Please, I really don’t. Nobody does.”

Somebody knows, I thought.

“What happens to the blood?”

Miss Crispin glanced behind her, then she motioned for me to follow. She hurried down the hallway, through a small door set into the wall, then down a narrow staircase into the basement. I gasped as I entered the basement storeroom.

Inside, stacked three high were barrels marked by blood type.

“Every day, in the late afternoon, a steam carriage comes to pick them up,” Miss Crispin explained.

“Every barrel?” I asked.

Miss Crispin nodded.

“Where do they go?”



In the alley, off Fourth Street, I leaned against a wall, watching the back entrance to the Blood Bank as I racked my brain. Who would want to prevent vampires from accessing the blood banks, and why?

The lack of blood available to the vampires in Melfall hadn't caused an attack—yet—but it would be only a matter of time before a dreadful situation arose.

I shivered, remembering the dreams that still plagued me every night. The dream had taken on a different flavor since my visit to Raven's workshop, and I'd woken hot, sweaty, and wanting.

I pushed a strand of hair out of my eyes and focused on the problem at hand. I'd been waiting for the steam-powered wagon to arrive for an hour. Even in the shade of the buildings, heat wafted from the streets. As I waited, perspiration made loose strands of hair stick to the sides of my face.

Finally, the shadows lengthened, and a breath of late afternoon breeze provided some relief.

A rumbling sound caught my attention, and I stood upright, suddenly focused. The wagon rounded the corner into the alley, and two men jumped off to rap sharply on the back entrance of the Fourth Street Blood Bank.

I shrank into the shadows, hiding from notice, but the men barely looked up as they came out with the barrels carried on their shoulders, loading them into the wagon one by one.

When they were finished, they covered the barrels with cloth, then tied them down with ropes. Then, with a whistle, they jumped aboard the wagon

to leave. The back door to the blood bank swung closed.

The wagon continued on its way to the end of the alley before I pulled Chesh's steam bike out of the shadows and kick-started it.



I kept the steam-powered wagon in sight as it chugged through Melfall, passing the Clubs Quarter Blood Bank, and the Central Blood Bank, before heading into the district of the old Royal Palace.

At the sight of the old palace, my heart started to race. The late Queen—or perhaps the returned Queen if Raven was right—was a vampire. Perhaps she wanted the blood donations for herself? It made sense.

As I watched, my conclusions were dashed as the steam wagon didn't stop. It continued to wind through the narrow streets, into the back streets, before it came to a stop at a gate that was not marked by any signage or numbering that I could see.

I looked around to try to get my bearings. We'd come to a lane of service entrances for the large estates, mostly owned by the old families of Melfall. I didn't know the area well enough to know which entrance belonged to which house.

A man jumped from the wagon and walked over to open the gate. It was locked, but the man appeared to have a key, and he held the gate open so that the wagon, now full of the day's blood donations, could enter.

Once the wagon had passed through the entrance, and the man started to pull the gate closed, and I got a glimpse of another figure who'd been standing inside the gates.

I didn't get a good look at his face, but I recognized the garish stripes of his suit.

It was Tweedle Dee.

Or, maybe, Tweedle Dum.



“Are the Mr. Tweedles expecting you, Miss?” The butler opened the door and stared down at me over his long nose.

“They are not,” I replied, lifting my chin. “I would be very grateful if you could announce my visit.”

I prepared to step inside the entrance hall, but the butler stood his ground in the doorway.

“The Mr. Tweedles are not presently at home.”

I frowned, certain that it had been the Tweedles I’d seen at the back entrance to a nearby estate.

“Are you sure?”

The butler sniffed, pursing his lips. “Quite sure. I am not expecting them back until very late this evening.”

“Do you know where they are?” I asked. “I have a few questions for them, and I would like to see them directly.”

“I shall tell the Mr. Tweedles that you called.”

I stared at him, but the butler didn’t appear to be hiding anything. I supposed that the Tweedles didn’t confide in their butler as to their whereabouts. I sighed, then nodded.

“I would appreciate it if you would mention Miss Rowntree called on them.”

“I shall be sure to pass on that message to the Mr. Tweedles, when they return. Good night, Miss Rowntree.” The butler gave a bow, then closed the door.

I slowly descended the steps and walked back to where I’d left my steam bike in the driveway.



The bike sputtered to a stop and I cursed. I didn’t even have to look to know that the engine was out of water. I stopped the engine, knowing that if I pushed it any further, I’d cause damage to its internal workings.

I was almost at the city center, and only a few blocks from home, so I dismounted and started trudging across the cobblestone market place, now empty for the night.

I heard a shout from overhead and looked up. There were figures standing on the scaffolding that wound around the sides of the clock tower.

My mouth fell open, and my heart thudded inside my chest. Without pausing to consider the consequences, I left the bike to stand in the market

and grabbed my skirts in my fists, hiking them up enough to run toward the tower.

I'd been waiting for the opportunity to get close to the Pinnacle clock since it started working again. I had to take it.

I put my foot on the rung of the first ladder and started climbing.

I'd reached the ladder leading up to the third level of scaffolding, where I would be able to examine the clock's inner workings up close when I heard a shout.

Without looking around, I gripped the rungs of the ladder and hauled myself up. The wind tugged at the loose strands of my hair, whipping them around my face. It blew up my skirts and petticoats, but I kept climbing.

"What are you doing up there? Stop her!" The voice came from below. I didn't look down. I concentrated on the next rung, then the next, climbing until I was pulling myself onto the third level of scaffolding.

The platform shook as heavy footsteps approached me.

I stood, holding out my hands for balance. I turned towards the clock, and my mouth dropped open.

It was as though someone had taken the face off of a very complex clock, and I was staring straight at the inner workings. I reached out to run my fingers over the parts, moving in regular synchronicity, making time march forward with the precision of an army. It was one of the most complex mechanisms that I'd ever seen.

A man in a worn, dirty shirt, and torn trousers, approached me.

"You cannot be here. This area is restricted."

I kept my eyes fixed on the clock, and gripped the railing of the scaffold, determined that this man would not drag me away. Not before I puzzled out its mysteries.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Trying to fix the clock, of course," he answered his tone gruff. He reached out for my elbow. "Really, Miss, I'm going to have to ask—"

"It doesn't need fixing. It's working perfectly well, as you can see." I pointed out, jerking my elbow away from his grip.

The man signed. "That's the problem, Miss. Now, if you'll follow—?"

I leaned forward to get a better look at the mechanisms inside. "Have you worked out what made the clock start working again?"

"Do you know something about clocks, Miss?" the man asked.

I nodded.

He hesitated, looking over his shoulder. “There are too many moving parts. It’s a very complex piece of machinery, and it won’t seem to stop ticking—it’s driving everyone mad.”

“Who asked you to fix it?” I asked, trying to distract the man, as I continued to study the mechanism. I felt for the familiar weight in my pocket and pulled out Mr. Pillar’s pocket watch, which I still had not returned. I flicked it open. It was still working, though I hadn’t wound it since receiving it from Mr. Pillar. As I stared at it, I noticed the second hand ticked in exact time with the audible ticking of the Pinnacle clock.

“Our orders came direct from President Rowntree,” he replied.

“From the President?” I flicked the lid of the watch shut and shoved it back into my pocket.

“Yes, Madam President doesn’t like the ticking any more than anyone else. Now,” he repeated firmly, “I’m going to escort you down to the ground, Miss. We restrict this area. Though this clock hasn’t killed anyone yet, I wouldn’t want you to be the first.”

He took my elbow firmly, and this time, I couldn’t shake him off. He turned me back toward the ladder.

I glanced out at the city below, and the sight suddenly stopped me in my tracks. I’d been so busy staring at the clockwork I hadn’t noticed that I was standing on the top of the tallest landmark in Melfall. From here, the whole city spread out before me.

“I must insist, Miss,” the man said, tightening his grip on my elbow. “I’d rather not carry you down that ladder.”

25 AUGUST



“It’s your sister.”

Chesh spoke as I stepped into the sitting room for breakfast. I was surprised to see him, particularly this early. He pulled out a seat next to him. I stared at him without understanding.

“What about my sister?” I asked.

Chesh’s wide smile was absent, as the worry pulled his mouth down at the corners. “She was attacked last night.”

I jumped up from my seat. “What happened? Is she all right?”

Chesh put his hand on my arm, pulling me back down next to him. He gripped my hand and held it, looking into my eyes.

“It was a Heart,” he said. Moisture welled in his eyes, and the dark smudges under his eyes stood out in his unusually pale face. “It happened so fast.”

“Is she all right?” I repeated.

Chesh nodded. “I distracted it, then got her away. I brought her back here. She’s shaken, but not seriously harmed. The doctor assured us that she’ll be fine in a day or so.”

I stood from the table. “I need to see her,” I said, but the sitting room door opened, and Alice came in. Her figure was slumped with weariness, but her lips were pinched together tightly.

“Pearl is sleeping. You can see her later,” Alice said, as she sat down at the head of the table.

“Are you alright, Mother? Did you get any sleep at all?”

Alice waved a hand, as though to swat away my words. She looked at Mr. Hopewell, the butler. “Fetch Jack here directly.”

He nodded his head and rushed away to do her bidding.

“Those Hearts are a menace, terrorizing this city. I’ve had enough,” Alice snapped, then sipped at the coffee that had been placed in front of her.

Jack strode inside, smiling as he greeted Alice in the same way he did every morning. Alice didn’t bother with polite words as she launched into her instructions. “Tell Captain Walsh that every guard is to search for those cursed Hearts. I want them locked up by nightfall—every one. I will not tolerate another Heart attack in Melfall. Do you understand?”

Jack nodded, wide-eyed, then hurried out.

I watched the door close, wondering at the puzzles that nagged at me: the sudden ticking of the Pinnacle clock, the appearance of the Hearts, the rumors of the Queen’s return, the mysterious buying up of the city’s blood stores, Raven’s plot against Alice. It had to all be connected.

“Mother, I’ve been thinking...” I started.

Alice closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Unless it’s information about the capture of these Hearts, I don’t have time for it today.”

I pressed my lips together. “No, it’s not about that. I... Do you know there are rumors that the Queen is returning?”

“The Queen is dead,” Alice snapped. She gripped the side of the table with both hands, her knuckles going white with the force of it. Beside me, Chesh froze. Alice breathed deeply through her nose before she spoke again. “The. Queen. Is. Dead. She has been gone for eighteen years. A few strange occurrences don’t change that. I’m trying to govern this city, and the continued repeating of rumors and speculation does not help me hold the city together.”

After a pause, her grip on the table loosened. She opened her eyes to stare at me, then caught sight of Chesh, apparently noticing him for the first time. She blinked, and two pink circles appeared at her cheeks. “I apologize for my outburst, Mr. Cheshire. I’m worried about my daughter, and I’m not feeling well-rested this morning. Please excuse my lack of courtesy.”

With one final glare in my direction, Alice rose from the table and left the room.



I paced in Pearl's room, waiting for her to wake. After Chesh and I had eaten our breakfast in silence, he'd left to open the shop, and I'd disobeyed Alice's instructions to come to Pearl's room.

I stared at Mr. Pillar's pocket watch, mesmerized by the continued movement of the second hand. It seemed as though it was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't understand it.

As always, I could feel the mechanism working inside it, without looking. There was nothing wrong with it, but I had never once wound the watch—how did it work if the winding mechanism was not required? I'd opened up the watch, studying the inside, but couldn't work out what was supplying the alternative source of energy.

It didn't make any sense. The movement of the second hand moved in exact time with the ticking of the Pinnacle clock, both of them hammering away, as though saying: *think, think, think*.

The answer seemed just out of reach, and my inability to grasp it was maddening.

"Would you stop that? You're making me tired, watching you."

I spun around to stare at Pearl, snapping the watch case closed. Her eyes were open, but she had barely moved. Her long blonde hair was fanned out on her pillow, her pale complexion as soft as the linens she rested against.

"Are you alright?" I asked, coming to her side to perch on the end of the bed as I took her hand. "Are you hurt?"

Pearl nodded. "My head hurts. My back hurts. Everything hurts." She took a trembling breath. "Did they catch it?" Her blue eyes stared deeply into mine. I saw the fear in them.

I shook my head. "Mother has the city guards searching for the Hearts. We'll find them," I said.

"I was going to the salon," Pearl whispered. "Chesh was walking with me. He was looking for you and decided to accompany me. The Heart came out of nowhere. It grabbed me and threw me against the wall."

"Then what happened?"

"I hit my head—everything was fuzzy after that. Chesh was there. He was very brave. He carried me, brought me back here. I don't know what I would have done without him. The Heart might have killed me." Pearl stared out of the window, her expression distant.

My stomach clenched at the thought that something terrible might have happened to Pearl. I gripped her hand tighter, wishing I hadn't been so busy

lately, wishing I'd had more time to spend with my twin.

"I'm so glad you're all right," I whispered.

Pearl blinked, as though suddenly remembering my presence. "No permanent damage. I have no idea what I would do if the Heart had done something that devalued my esthetic stipend. It's barely enough as it is."

I bit my lip, reminded of the unbeautiful living in tunnels, and those who sought Wit's help. Scarred, marked, poorly dressed, or simply plain. None of them could draw on the esthetic stipend for their living, either. It tore at my heart that the city ignored them. The fact that my sister had narrowly escaped a similar fate made me feel sick.

Suddenly, I couldn't sit by my sister's bedside any longer. I had to find answers. I looked outside at the long shadows of the afternoon. There was still daylight left. I made up my mind—there was only one person who knew what was happening in this city. I needed to find Raven and demand answers.

I patted Pearl's hand. "I have some things that I need to do now," I murmured. "Do you need anything more before I go?"

Pearl bit her bottom lip, a habit I hadn't seen her do since she was an awkward girl before she'd grown into her beauty. "Pass me my mirror," Pearl said, and pointed to the small hand-held mirror lying on her bedside table.

I did so, then crossed the room to open the door.

"Ivy?" I turned back to see Pearl staring at her reflection in the glass. "Chesh is very handsome, isn't he?"

I frowned, feeling a sudden tightness in my chest. "Yes, I suppose he is."

"You're not interested in him?"

I paused as the tight feeling intensified. Pearl's eyes slid sideways so that she was looking at me from underneath her eyelashes.

"Chesh is my friend," I replied, surprised to hear the plea in my voice.

Pearl smiled, then looked in her mirror again. I stared at her, hesitating, then shut the door behind me.



The sign on the door of *Cappello's Finest Hats* declared the shop open, and the bell tinkled as I stepped inside.

Miss Lapin hurried around the counter and smiled as she recognized me. "Mr. Cappello will be pleased to see you," she said. "May I bring you refreshment before I fetch him. Tea, perhaps?"

I caught a glimpse of myself in the large mirror hanging on the wall. My hair was ruffled, my shirt rumpled, and there were bright spots on my cheeks. I straightened my shirt and ran a hand over my hair, trying to smooth it.

I forced a smile. "Thank you."

Miss Lapin hurried away, leaving me to browse the shop. Not a moment passed before I heard footsteps on the stairs.

"Miss Rowntree," Raven said. I turned to see his sleek, lithe figure descending the stairs with a regal grace. His eyes sparkled, and the side of his lips twitched. "You have returned. I must admit, I thought you might have come sooner."

"Did you miss me?" I said and instantly regretted it.

Raven chuckled. He turned to me, looking me over as though studying me. He was holding a hat in his hands, and he came over to me to place it on my head. I kept still, as his fingers gently brushed my hair.

He stood back, appraising me, lips pursed. "No, not that one, either." He whipped the hat from my head, tossing it onto the counter. "You do intrigue me, Miss Rowntree, but I will find your hat."

I felt warmth rise to my cheeks. "I'm sorry to have disappointed you, Mr. Cappello," I said.

Raven turned, eyes wide. He reached out to put a finger to my chin, raising my face toward him. "I'm not disappointed in you, Miss Rowntree. Rather, I'm disappointed in my own skills as a milliner. Do not be alarmed, I've never shied away from a challenge."

"Here you are, Miss Rowntree," Miss Lapin appeared with a pot of tea.

"We shall take it upstairs, Miss Lapin," Raven said before Miss Lapin had the opportunity to set it down. She nodded, turning towards the stairs.

"I actually came because—" I started, but Raven put a finger to his lips, glancing at Miss Lapin.

He put a hand firmly on the small of my back and guided me towards the staircase. My heart raced as he positioned himself so close to me that we were almost touching.

Upstairs, Miss Lapin set down the tray with a teapot and two teacups on a small table, then excused herself. Raven poured the tea, then offered one cup to me, before settling himself in the chair opposite.

“I’ve come—” I started, but Raven interrupted me again.

“How did your sister like the hat you chose for her?” Raven asked. He leaned back in his chair, as though completely at ease. I sat upright, rigid, and aware of every muscle in my body. I remembered Pearl.

“Pearl is the reason I came,” I said. “Yesterday, she was attacked. By a Heart.”

The smile dropped from Raven’s face. He leaned forward, reaching across the table to offer me his hand. I wanted to reach out, but I tightened my fingers around the porcelain saucer in my hands.

“Is she...?”

“Oh, yes. She’s alive. She’s fine—well, she’s not hurt, anyway.” The teacup clattered as my hand trembled. Raven reached over and took the cup and saucer from me and set it down on the table. Then he knelt next to my chair and took my hands. I startled, instinctively trying to draw my hands away, but Raven tightened his grip. I saw sympathy and kindness in his face.

“Are you all right?”

I closed my eyes, as much to stop myself getting lost in his gaze as to remember my mission. I took a breath. “None of this makes sense. The clock, the Hearts, the cogs, the blood bank...” I was rambling. I squeezed Raven’s fingers as I opened my eyes and stared directly into his. “Tell me the truth. What’s going on in Melfall?”



The door shut behind me, and I was suddenly plunged into darkness. Even the darkness outside was softened by the light of the moon. My heart raced as I heard Raven’s footsteps behind me. I touched my throat, on the place where I’d dreamed about the vampire bite.

In my dreams, the face had become Raven—or had it always been Raven—I was no longer sure. I knew my blood was pumping through my veins, and Raven could probably smell it from where he was standing.

With his heightened senses, he could probably see the vein pulsing madly. I put my other hand to my stomach, trying to settle the storm brewing inside.

I heard another movement somewhere in the room, but I couldn't see anything. Was it Raven? But he'd been behind me a moment ago. Or was I turned around? My breath caught.

"Mr. Cappello?" I whispered.

There was a scraping sound, and then a flame appeared. It illuminated Raven's face; the tiny fire mirrored in Raven's dark eyes as he stared at me. The light danced, casting shadows across Raven's face, glinting off the pointed fangs as he smiled at me.

I gripped my throat tighter, stepping backwards. Suddenly, I wasn't certain this was a good idea. Something about Raven made my pulse race, and I wasn't sure whether I liked it or not.

Raven tilted his head, as though he wasn't sure what to make of me, then he stepped sideways and reached out with the hand holding the light. Another light caught, and another. In a moment, a chandelier of candles was burning brightly.

The darkness was chased away, revealing a large sitting room. Large leather armchairs faced an unlit fireplace, a circular rug covered the floor, and several paintings decorated the walls, themselves fashioned with wine-red wallpaper. It was a cozy room, comfortable.

I took a breath and made an effort to stop clutching at my throat.

"I apologize. I think I frightened you, Miss Rowntree. I should have warned you that it was dark in here. I tend to forget that you aren't equipped with my eyesight."

I attempted a smile. "Please, call me Ivy," I said, wishing the storm in my stomach would settle.

"I will call you Ivy, as long as you call me Raven," Raven said, and he smiled broadly at me, revealing his fangs again. I sucked in a breath, then tried to act as though it was natural.

"You are still frightened, Ivy," Raven said, frowning. "I thought you were afraid of the dark. Now I wonder whether it's me that you're afraid of?"

I pleated the fabric of my skirts between my fingers and attempted a smile again. "I..." I tried to shake my head. "I'm sorry. It's just that I've never been friends with a vampire before and—"

“And you’ve been warned about my bloodthirsty ways?” Raven said. His eyes dropped away, and he stared up at a painting on the wall. It was a portrait of a very beautiful woman. She had glossy black hair, piled on her head with curls tumbling down on one side.

“This woman,”—Raven waved towards the painting—“is my mother. She was very beautiful.”

“She was,” I agreed.

“I told you that my father was a milliner, did I not?”

I nodded.

“My parents were both human. Both born of Melfall, more than a century ago. They married, they had five children. I was one of them—the eldest and trained as a milliner, to take over my father’s business. I had two sisters and two brothers. Even after birthing five children, my mother was very beautiful.

“One day, she caught the Queen’s eye. The Queen was a renowned beauty, too. She appreciated the beauty in everything—did you know that? She was the one who set up the esthetic stipend first. She thought beauty should be rewarded. It wasn’t long before beauty was the measure of everything. As you know, in this city, it still is.”

I swallowed, remembering the poor, unbeautiful people in the tunnels.

“The Queen asked my mother to be among her ladies-in-waiting. My mother couldn’t refuse. No one refused anything of the Queen—it could cost one’s life to anger her. At first, it was fine. The Queen was demanding, and my mother spent long hours away from us, but we were old enough to fend for ourselves. I was an adult—barely—and working with my father in the shop. My younger siblings were growing up and made themselves useful. They didn’t need the constant supervision of our mother.

“One day, when my mother left for work, my father reached out to touch her hair, laughing. He’d found a gray hair among the black, and said that she wouldn’t be able to work much longer for the Queen, who wouldn’t hold with such imperfection. My mother didn’t come back that night. Nor the next.” Raven sighed deeply.

“What happened to her?” I asked.

Raven swallowed, unable to take his eyes from the painting, though he seemed a long way away. “I was in the workshop, designing a new hat. Something special - a surprise for my mother’s birthday. I heard a scuffle

downstairs. At first, I just thought it was my brothers being foolish. Then there was a scream.

“I ran downstairs to see what had happened. I found my father, and my brothers and sisters lying on the floor. My mother was hunched over them. Blood poured from her chin. When she looked up at me, her eyes were red. All I could see were the long fangs dripping with blood.”

I gasped. “She’d been turned into a vampire?”

Raven nodded. “The Queen turned her. She said it was too terrible to think of my mother’s beauty fading with age. This way, she would be beautiful forever. When my mother saw me standing in the doorway, she leaped on me with a strength and speed that shocked me. Her fangs were deep into my throat before I knew what was happening.”

“But she didn’t kill you?”

Raven shook his head. “Maybe because her thirst was already sated on the blood of my father and my siblings. Or maybe because I’d had the foresight to grab a club as I came downstairs. In any case, I survived to become a vampire myself. While the rest of my family perished.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I stood, staring at the aloof beauty of the woman and wondered how long it had tortured her, knowing she’d killed her own family.

“Does she live still?” I asked.

Raven shook his head. “It takes a lot to kill a vampire, and it rarely happens, but it is possible.” He hesitated. “I killed her. In vengeance for what she did to the rest of my family. It took a long time for me to learn how to do it. During that time, my mother tried to apologize. She tried justifying her actions as driven by bloodlust. She tried to explain that she, herself, was tortured by the lives she’d taken. I wouldn’t hear of it. The night I killed her, I swore that I would never again drink from a human. I would neither kill them nor turn them into a vampire. He wrenched his eyes from the painting. “So, you see, Ivy, you don’t need to be afraid of me.”

He stared at me, his eyes seemed to droop, and they’d lost their sparkle. When he looked at me, it was as though his eyes were pleading with me, vulnerable and exposed. For what? I wasn’t sure.

I crossed my arms across my waist, hugging myself, partly to stop myself from reaching out to him to smooth the sadness from his face.

I thought about how close I’d come to losing Pearl, and it tore strips from my heart. Raven had lost his whole family in a moment because he’d

been a little too slow to react to their screams. Or perhaps it had already been too late then. How would I cope without Alice? Sure, she was busy with ruling The Forge, but she'd raised us, cared for us, and loved us. I couldn't imagine life without her. I certainly couldn't imagine being so angry with her that I would kill her. Then, the thoughts of Alice reminded me of why I was here.

"You won't harm humans, yet you're planning to attack my mother?" I said.

Raven's mouth dropped open. "What? No—"

"That's why you wanted information about her movements. Dr. Lapin said you needed someone who was close to her, who knew her habits and her whereabouts. That's the real reason you left me that card, isn't it?"

"No," Raven said. He spoke quietly, but that one word was imbibed with so much force that I stepped back. I waited for him to say something more, but as I waited, I felt the truth of it settle in my stomach. Without knowing exactly how, I knew he was telling the truth.

When I didn't reply, Raven let his eyes drop from my face, and his shoulders rounded as he stared at the floor. "This is what you think of me—that I'm a bloodthirsty killer, and a black-mailer, as well?"

My heart tugged, and before I knew it, I reached out for his elbow to stop him from moving away.

"I'm sorry. About your family, and your mother," I whispered. My heart hammered in my chest as I took a step closer to Raven. He lifted his head and stared at me, eyes widening in surprise.

The vulnerability was still written all over his face, but instead of sadness, there was a sense of hope. Standing before me, he didn't seem like a century-old vampire. He seemed like a young man, his confident demeanor stripped away, uncertain about what to do next.

I felt a pull toward him, as though there was a tether at my chest, connecting me to him. The feeling was so strong that I could barely breathe. I took another step to stand in front of him, aware of his body so close to mine.

I looked up, directly into his eyes, tilting my head toward his. My breath caught in my throat, as I realized I'd been in this moment before.

In my dreams.

I almost laughed. I'd been wrong—my dreams hadn't been warning me of a vampire attack but preparing me for this moment.

Without words, I knew Raven had been telling the truth—he wasn't going to hurt me. He wasn't trying to use me to hurt my family.

Raven bent slowly toward me, and his fangs glinted in the light of the candlelit chandelier. This time, I wasn't afraid of him.

This time, I wanted him to be closer to me.

He hesitated, barely a millimeter away from me. I yearned for the touch of his lips on mine.

I pushed up onto my toes, closing the tiny space, to press my lips against his.

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The Kingdom of Fairytales authors hope you enjoyed this new way of reading. We don't think that a series has ever been set with one chapter a day thought a whole year before and we hope we did it justice.

With this in mind, please leave a review, but when you do, remember that these books were always meant to be short breaks in your day and the blurb reflects that.

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THE KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES TEAM

These books would not be written without a great many people. Here is our team:

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J.A lives in a total fantasy world (because reality is boring right?) When she's not writing all the crazy fun in her head, she can be found eating cake, designing pretty pictures and hanging upside down from the tallest climbing frame in the local playground while her children look on in embarrassment. She's travelled the world working as everything from a banana picker in Australia to a Pantomime clown, has climbed to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and the bottom of the Grand Canyon and once gave birth to a surrogate baby for a friend of hers.

She spends way too much time gossiping on facebook and if you want to be part of her Reading Army, where you'll get lots of freebies, exclusive sneak peeks and super secret sales, join up here

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Somehow she finds time to write.



ABOUT ZARA QUENTIN

Zara Quentin is a fantasy author, book lover and traveller. Raised in Adelaide, Australia, Zara grew up with a strong sense of adventure, which she inherited from her parents, who took her and her sister on trips to the United States, Europe, and Asia.

She also inherited a love of reading from her mother. Throughout her childhood she explored fictional places through books, and in particular, through fantasy novels. She'd turn the black and white text on the page into the colourful worlds of her imagination. Later, she put pen to paper and started creating her own.

After graduating from high school, Zara studied at the University of Adelaide and has lived in France, London, and Auckland, New Zealand. She is always determined to stimulate her imagination with as much travel as possible, spending time in Europe, the United States, southern Africa, Morocco, Peru, the Pacific and south-east Asia.

Zara now resides in Melbourne, Australia with her husband and three children. She is the author of the Airwoman series, and is currently working on a brand new project.